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Dick Dashaway; or, A Dakota Boy in Chicago.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "BOB ROCKETT, THE BANK RUNNER," "BOB ROCKETT, THE BOY DODGER," "WILL WILDFIRE," "DARK PAUL," ETC., ETC.



THEN CAME A VIGOROUS HEAVE, A POWERFUL SEND, AND OVER DICK'S SHOULDER SHOT HIS FOE, WITH A TRUE DAKOTA FLING.

Dick Dashaaway;

OR,

A Dakota Boy in Chicago.

BY CHARLES HARRIS;
AUTHOR OF "THE FIVE BLOODS," "SHADOW
SAM," "BOB ROCKETT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A YOUNG MAN FROM THE WEST.

WITHIN the private office of a merchant, in the flourishing lake city of Chicago, on a pleasant morning in September, 18—, sat two persons. One of these was evidently the merchant himself. It did not need a second look to see that. There was a certain air of possession about him, and a conscious pride in the dignified manner with which he filled his easy-chair, and wielded his ivory paper-cutter like a scepter of office, that fully settled his position.

He was a man of ample frame, and of much breadth of face, which his baldness seemed to carry up over the top of his head. Wide lips, small, and half-closed eyes, and a short, blunt nose, did not make up a very handsome face, but it had great dignity of expression, and that air of command which belongs to the merchant prince. Any judge of physiognomy would have said that Richard Gordon, Esq., was a successful man, though perhaps not an over-scrupulous one.

His companion was a very different personage. He was dressed in a rough garb, in strong contrast with the glossy broadcloth of the merchant, and with something of the nautical in its cut. His face was brown as leather, as of one who has been much exposed to sun and storm, and was particularly ill-favored, while there was something decidedly sinister in the curl of his lip and the oblique glance of his narrow gray eyes.

Mr. Gordon leaned still further back in his chair, and pressed the paper-cutter reflectively upon his chin, as he looked with a dubious air at his companion.

"Are you sure it is well laid in and neatly covered?" he asked. "Any bungle now would spoil the whole job. You know that, Captain Sparks. It will be something neat in your pocket if your job is well done. It might not be so agreeable if it were ill-done."

"Just you tend to your end of the bargain, and I'll tend to mine," answered the captain, a little surlily. "Tisn't my first job, and well you know that. And I dunno as Tim Sparks is in the habit of bungling his work."

"The Rover is well loaded then? Trim and true, ready for her duty, eh?"

"Trust me for that. Git in her top load, give me a clean sailing sheet, and a wind abaft, and I'll show Chicago her heels before another night."

"And after—" with a significant look.

"Mum's the word. Talk's more dangerous than the small-pox, you know that. When Tim Sparks gits his sailing chart it's as good as a log book full of instructions. What does the weather prophet say for to-morrow?"

"Wind from the north-west, and danger signal up."

"That's clever. We'll drive the Rover to the devil or a market."

"Hist!" warned the merchant. "There's some one coming."

The office door opened as he spoke, and a third person entered the small and neatly appointed room. That this person was a stranger was very evident, from the look of surprise and inquiry which Mr. Gordon cast upon him.

He was, in fact, no ordinary-looking individual. A young man; little more than a boy; with almost beardless face, a narrow black mustache being his main signal of coming manhood. But young as the face was, it was as keen and wide-awake as if the weight of fifty years sat on those broad shoulders. It had, withal, a reckless, devil-may-care expression which betokened an individual ready to force his way head-first through the world, and to leap without question into any adventure that might turn up.

Aside from this the youth was decidedly handsome, his features well cut, his complexion brown but clear, his countenance frank and engaging, while his open black eyes could wrinkle with humor or flash in anger at a moment's turn. His form was as fine as his face. Broad shoulders, slim waist, moderate height, the port and carriage of an Apollo, he was one for ladies to admire and rufflers to

avoid, for there was something of the young lion in the youth's build and look.

But there was something more than the mere looks of the stranger to attract attention. His dress was evidently not that of a resident of Chicago, but betokened a traveler from much further west. The slouch hat, with very broad brim, the long boots and leathern breeches, the blue hunting-shirt, and carelessly tied red neck-cloth, all spoke of the broad prairies far beyond city limits, or of the mountain slopes of the distant region of mines. This frontier attire was worn with an air and grace which showed plainly that it had not been assumed for the occasion, but was the habitual dress of the wearer. In his whole aspect, in fact, was something of the broadness, freshness, and free flavor of the unlimited West.

Mr. Gordon looked curiously for a full minute at this striking figure before speaking. The youth had laid his hand on a chair-back, and stood, with easy grace, quietly waiting to be addressed.

Evidently Mr. Gordon did not quite like the steady and keen scrutiny of the black eyes of his visitor. He flushed slightly, while his brows wrinkled into a frown.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he asked peremptorily.

"Am I speaking to Mr. Gordon?" queried the youth, in a clear, full voice.

"That is my name."

"All right. Then you are the gentleman I want to see."

He coolly helped himself to a chair, threw his broad-brimmed hat on the table, ran his fingers through his clustering hair, and tilted the chair easily back on its two hind legs.

"Now I'm comfortable," he announced.

Captain Sparks looked at him as if he felt inclined to kick him from the office. A faint growl came from his lips. Plainly he did not approve of this specimen of western assurance.

"Excuse me," said Mr. Gordon, harshly. "I have important business to transact with this gentleman. Will you tell me what you want as quickly as possible? I have not a minute to spare."

"Well, go ahead. I'm in no hurry, and can wait till you get through. Out West we've always got all day before us, and do business only when we get tired of doing nothing."

"That's your way out West, eh? It's not our way in Chicago."

"That's what I've heard. It's all break-neck, root hog or die, hereaways. Dive in then. The day's young, and I'll read the news while you're settling this gentleman's hash."

He took up a newspaper from the table and coolly began to open it out.

"Lord! I'll settle your hash if this goes on," growled, under his breath, the incensed mariner.

"I tell you I have private business with this gentleman," cried Mr. Gordon, angrily. "Let me know at once what you want. Or else get out. I don't care much which."

"Oh, if you're in a hurry! That's a different matter. That's something I haven't been brought up to. Never was in a hurry in my life, and never expect to be. That's what comes of tying yourself up within four walls. If you had a whole prairie to spread yourself in you'd take life cooler."

"What do you want with me?" cried Mr. Gordon, now thoroughly angry.

"Hope you ain't getting in a huff. I came on here to make my way, that's about the truth. Things were getting blue as skim milk out West, and I calculated I'd dig out eastward. I've got an empty pocket, a good suit of clothes, strong hands, and a sound heart. That ought to be enough to set a man up in the world. Stick me in any reasonable place, and I'm your man. I'll earn my wages, you can bet high on that."

"Is that all?" cried Mr. Gordon severely. "There's the door, sir. You found your way in. See if you can find it out. If I had fifty jobs I hardly think I could spare one to a fellow with your stock of impudence.—That will do, sir, no answer is necessary."

"Much obliged," remarked the young man pleasantly. "I do brag a little on my stock of impudence, that's a fact. It's about as good as cash to push through the world with. But you are not going to cut me off so short as that?"

"Deuce take it!" cried Captain Sparks, springing to his feet as suddenly as if he had been shot up from a catapult. "I can't stand this. Just say the word, Mr. Gordon, and I'll take this sprout by the neck and kick him out of your office."

At these belligerent words the youthful stranger turned, and eyed the irate captain from head to foot, with a look that did not lessen the mariner's rage.

"Kick this sprout out, eh? Do you know what we do with chaps like you out West?"

"No."

"We stick them head down in gopher holes, and sit on them, to play poker for their old clothes."

"By thunder! I'll—"

"No you won't!" The youth had risen and faced his angry foe, while a keen flash shot from his black eyes. "If you know when you're well off you'll sit down, and cork up your conversation mug. Mr. Gordon and I have got some business, and don't want any jack-screw games from outsiders."

At this contemptuous speech the irate captain fairly leaped with rage, while a blue tinge came about his lips. He flung his chair aside and seemed on the point of springing upon his antagonist, who waited for him without moving a muscle of his well-knit frame.

"Come, come, my men, this will never do!" exclaimed Mr. Gordon, hastily rising, and pushing his portly frame between the antagonists. "Leave me to settle my own business, Captain Sparks, if you please. I will not permit any fighting in my office.—As for you, sirrah—"

"Keep your seat, Mr. Gordon," broke in the youth pleasantly. "I am not going to hurt the captain. I rather admire a man that's got so much fight in him that he goes off like a sky rocket if he's touched with a match. Give me your hand, Cap, and we'll call it square."

"I'll settle you yet, you prairie dog!" yelled the angry mariner, as he flung himself out of the office. "Wait till I catch you where there's a free field."

An amused laugh came from the youth's lips, as Captain Sparks disappeared.

"The man must have quicksilver in him. I haven't said anything to make him stand on his ear. Never saw such a queer little leather-faced sea-dog before. Well, now we've got rid of him suppose we come down to business, Mr. Gordon."

The youth quietly resumed his chair, and tilted it back as easily as if nothing had yet been said. Mr. Gordon fumed with anger at this fresh instance of imperturbable assurance.

"Haven't I told you that I have no business with you?" he exclaimed. "I have no situations to offer, and wouldn't give you one if I had a thousand. Is not that plain enough? Do you want a knock-down hint?"

"No. I can't say as I do. Out West we don't give hints. We knock down at the start. It comes to the same thing, you see, and saves so much waste talk. I calculated you'd put me in at something, Mr. Gordon. That's why I brought a letter of introduction."

"A letter of introduction? That's the first I heard of it."

"Just so. We Westerners never believe in rushing things. And little spitfire put me out. Here it is, sir."

He handed the merchant a letter, which he extracted from an inner pocket. While Mr. Gordon was perusing the address with a peculiar look, the youth took up the newspaper, and began to read as easily as though he had no interest in the result.

A change came over Mr. Gordon's expression as he resumed his seat and hurriedly tore open the letter. His first look was at the signature.

"Howard Brown? Did you receive this from Howard Brown?"

"Cornell silver stock 75. That's a clever jump," murmured the youth.—"Ah! excuse me. Did you speak?"

"Did Howard Brown give you this letter?"

"Yes. He wanted to keep me West, but I convinced him—I have a very convincing way sometimes, sir—I convinced him that it was desirable to let me go East. So he very kindly gave me that letter of introduction."

"Very good in him," murmured Mr. Gordon, who was now reading the epistle. "Quite a piece of benevolence on his part."

The youth looked sharply up from his paper at these words. They had something ambiguous in their tone that appeared to attract his attention. Mr. Gordon's brows were knitted, his face wore a sinister expression, and as he read there came upon his lips a smile, of that peculiar kind that is tenfold more threatening than a frown.

He did not know that those sharp eyes were reading his countenance, or he might have kept its expressive changes more under control.

"And are you the young man that my friend speaks of here, Richard Dashaway?"

"That's me, to a hair. Dick Dashaway I generally get. Or Dashing Dick of Dakota, as some of the boys call me. I answer to any of these names."

"Dashing Dick of Dakota, eh? Very well. My friend recommends you highly. I must find you something to do. Come in to-morrow morning. I will look if there's any opening. By the way, what can you do?"

"Anything, sir. I'm good at anything. From a match at base-ball to shooting a grizzly. If you want anybody to sell wheat on change, or run a first class steamboat, I'm your man."

"That will do, Mr. Dashaway." The merchant had suddenly grown very polite.

"By the way, if you see Captain Sparks in the store will you be kind enough to tell him that I wish to see him?"

"Certainly. Good-day, Mr. Gordon." Dick donned his broad-brimmed hat, and strode from the office with something of a western swagger in his step. But an odd look came upon his handsome countenance as he closed the door behind him.

"I'm always afraid of a cat when it begins to purr," he said to himself. "There's something in the wind. Gordon don't mean me well. What's amiss, anyway? I thought I was as smooth with him as butter on toast; but politeness is wasted on some men."

Meanwhile Mr. Gordon was reperusing his letter, with a harsh and malignant expression of countenance.

"Can you bury nothing so deep but it will come up?" he muttered savagely. "I thought that old affair was thoroughly settled. But, here turns up this boy after twenty long years of security! It was wise in Brown to send him to me. It would have been wiser if he had settled him for good. But as for holding this fellow if he made up his mind to go, I don't wonder Brown failed. Hang me if I ever saw such a customer.—You shall have a situation, Mr. Dashaway. A permanent one. You impertinent young viper, it would have been better for you to leap off a precipice with a rope around your neck, than to put yourself into my hands."

CHAPTER II.

UNDER SAILING ORDERS.

It is the day succeeding that in which our story opened. The scene is the same, the private office of the merchant, Richard Gordon. The persons are the same, the merchant himself and his maritime friend, Captain Sparks.

"You have your sailing orders," said Mr. Gordon, in conclusion of a long conversation. "You need no further instructions. That nor'-wester is in the air now. It will be blowing great guns before you are fifty miles out. I am a little afraid for the old Rover." He closed with an ambiguous laugh.

"I will be a man of my word," replied the hard-faced captain. "I will run her to a market, or to the bottom. But who's this chap you're giving me for mate?"

"What do you think of the young fellow you saw here yesterday?"

Captain Sparks sprung to his feet with a bitter oath.

"Dang my buttons!" he ejaculated, "do you take me for a confounded lake pickerel, or a blue-nose gudgeon, that you're tryin' to put that on me? The impudent young tarrier, I'd sooner tie him neck and heels and toss him into the lake than sail with him."

"Then he is the man," remarked the merchant with a sly smile. "He is a bold young villain, and will do his duty. That is why I gave him the berth."

"Then you can sort out another captain, for I'd sail with Old Nick for mate afore I'd take that boy."

Captain Sparks jabbed his tarpaulin irately upon his head, and turned curtly upon his heel.

"I'd toss the rat overboard afore I were ten mile out," he fiercely affirmed. "For I hate him like rank p'izon. The devil take the Rover! I'll not sail in her, that's flat." He walked with a sailor's swing to the door.

"Yes you will," exclaimed the merchant, in a significant tone. "Do you fancy that I am in love with the boy?"

The irate captain paused and glanced back at these words. Mr. Gordon came close up to him, and said in a hurried and half-whispered tone:

"Throw him over, if you like! Or if the Rover goes down, let her take this boy with her! On your peril see that he does not come back to Chicago."

There was the deep malignity of a murderous purpose in these words. The captain looked shrewdly into the face of his employer, as if seeking to read his full meaning. He shook his grizzled head.

"I'm too old to begin that kind of work," he said. "I mought flatten out the boy in a flurry; but not in cold blood—no, no."

Mr. Gordon caught him by the shoulder, and hurriedly whispered in his ear.

A dark change came upon the captain's face. He shook for a moment as in an ague.

"It can't be," he fiercely ejaculated. "Why it's a good twenty years. And old Dash—"

"Hush!" warned the merchant. "Don't speak that name here. He's safe under ground, I tell you. But this boy—hang it, where are your eyes? There's the whole story in his face.—Don't bring him back, I say!"

Captain Sparks slowly removed his tarpaulin, and rubbed his head with a dubious gesture. A look of malignant cunning came upon his ill-favored face.

"Blast me, if I didn't reckonise summat myself in the boy's phiz. It's State's prison for us both if he smells the rat."

"A drowned rat is past smelling."

A look full of the meaning of deep villainy passed between the precious pair.

"I'll do it!" ejaculated the captain.

As if fearful to trust himself with mere words, he again thrust his hat upon his head, and hastily left the room. The clerks in the store outside read in his face, as he passed, only the bluff honesty of the old sailor. They dreamed not of the murderous thoughts that germinated in his mind.

"Fear is a better spur than hate," murmured the villainous merchant, as he turned back to his chair. "To think of it! After twenty years of safety! Luckily the boy does not know yet who he is. But the secret is not safe for a minute while he is in this city. There's only one sure way, and I can trust Captain Sparks."

Dick Dashaway had had an interview with the merchant at an earlier hour that morning, and had readily accepted the offer made him to sail under instructions, and with the honorary office of "mate" in the voyage of a grain vessel across the lake. If he had been asked to accept the presidency of a railroad, or to become captain of an Atlantic steamer, it would have been all one to him. He had assurance enough for anything, and his one rule of life was to make a bold dash forward, and "devil take the hindmost."

"It's the first step that counts," said Dick to himself, as he walked leisurely along one of the main streets of Chicago. "I'm bound to make my fortune, or split. Let me once make a stake and I'll strike for the grain exchange here. Neck or nothing is my motto. The fellow that can't swim on the top can crawl on the bottom, and I'm bound to sink or swim. But hang me, if I thought old Gordon was going to pan out so lively. That letter did the work. But there was a thundering dubious look on the old coon's face when he read it. I wonder if there can be something behind all this? I'd give my hat for a chance to read that letter."

He walked slowly on, using his eyes freely. He had never before been in a great city, and Chicago was a new revelation to him. Particularly the hurrying throngs of people on the streets attracted his attention.

"I've heard of cities, but this beats Bannager," he ejaculated. "Looks like an army on the double quick. What in the blazes does it all mean, anyhow? I was never in a hurry in my life, and ain't used to see men rushing as if the devil was following them with his pitchfork."

Little attention was paid to Dick. Westerners were no rarity, in that city of the lakes. Here and there a lady cast an admiring look upon his handsome face, free tread, and graceful bearing, but the men had no time to waste on a loitering stranger.

Dick was not slow to return these looks of admiration from fair eyes. He swore to himself that he had never seen the like before.

"We don't have that sort on the plains," he muttered. "Such eyes! Such mouths! Such noses! And cheeks like strawberries and cream! And hair like spun silk! And silks, and velvets, and diamonds! Why, it's enough to take a poor devil's breath away.—Look at that one now. Strawberries and cream ain't a touch there. It's roses smothered in lilies. And eyes that play like the Aurora Borealis."

Dick, after this high flown simile, dropped his eyes, with an air as if he could not endure the bright looks of the fair maiden whose beauty had so affected him.

She had seemed no less interested in Dick than he in her, and her eyes were lifted in more than one stolen glance of admiration as she tripped lightly by.

She was indeed, of rare beauty, and dressed with ravishing taste, and the susceptible young stranger could well be pardoned the look of interest with which he followed her retreating steps. But by an odd chance she had turned to look after him at the same instant, and their eyes met in mid encounter.

A warm blush suffused the girl's bright cheeks as she hastily withdrew her eyes. But Dick was by no means so bashful. He continued to follow with admiring looks the graceful undulations of her form, until she was lost in the crowd.

"By the great grizzly," he ejaculated, "but I was never so shot through by a pair of black eyes in my life! Wonder if they set that kind up on 'change?"

For a moment he felt half inclined to follow the charmer who had struck him through with this sudden flame. But a second consideration made him give up this idea.

"It's not square," he said. "She wouldn't follow me. And what's sound logic for a woman ought to be for a man. If they do call me Dashing Dick, nobody can say I ever did anything mean. And I'm not going to begin now because I've caught the glitter of a girl's black eyes. If I'm to run across her again the time will come. Guess I'd best walk down and inspect that lively little schooner, the flying Rover."

An hour afterward found him on a wharf which ran well out into the lake, at the end of which lay a large, but rather dilapidated schooner. Dick looked at it critically, his eyes expressing anything but satisfaction.

"Hang it all, to hear old Gordon you'd have thought we were to sail in the queen's yacht, instead of this patched-up old hulk. I don't profess to know anything about vessels, but I'd be sorry to buy this worm-eaten craft for firewood. Anyhow I'm in for it. Dick Dashaway never went back on his word."

He sprang lightly to the deck of the vessel, and commenced a round of inspection of the battered craft. Just then the cabin-door opened and Captain Sparks made his appearance. Dick slightly started and a muttered exclamation came from his lips. He squared his broad shoulders and fixed his keen black eyes upon the redoubtable captain.

"You don't mean to say that you're the gentleman who commands this elegant specimen of naval architecture?" asked Dick.

"I am captain of this boat," was the curt answer.

"That's a decidedly rich joke in old Gordon! Well, how is it to be, Cap? You were going to kick me through the window yesterday. Are we to shake hands or squeeze throats?"

Captain Sparks looked for a moment as if he would have preferred the latter. But he quickly threw off this belligerent aspect, and advanced with outstretched hand.

"As we're to sail together we'd better sail as friends than foes," he remarked.

"Just as you please. It's all one to me," said Dick, indifferently, as he grasped the old sailor's horny paw. "Somehow I like a good solid fight now and then. It keeps the blood moving. So you've heard of my appointment as first mate to this first-rater?"

"Yes. What do you know about a vessel?"

"I know the rudder end from the bow," Dick answered with a comical shrug.

"Just as I'd a notion. Mr. Gordon put you here to fill up. Well, you've a sharp eye. Keep it open, an' maybe you'll pick up a few pints while we're crossing the lake."

"All right, Cap. I'm not mackerel enough to salt down yet, but I can take in a good deal in a flash. You'll find me a sound pupil. When do we sail?"

"On the mark three, this afternoon. Be on hand lively, for the Rover stops not for crew or cargo."

"Ay, ay!" answered Dick, giving a nautical hoist to his waistband. "The Rover won't sail without her mate."

Captain Sparks followed the athletic form of the young man as he walked away, with a gloomy look.

"Somehow I wish she would," he muttered. "I don't like this job. But safety's better than sentiment, and I hate the impudent young viper like sin. If he were wise he'd give the Rover a wide berth."

But that was not Dashing Dick's way. He was on board with his kit in good time, and watched with keen interest the operations of

getting the vessel under sail. He had entered into a new school, and was bound to show himself an apt pupil.

The hawsers loosened she swung gradually off from the wharf, and began already to gather way in the outflowing current as her crew hauled away upon lifts and sheets, and the broad foresail began to spread and unfold.

"You'd best drop in ag'in, Cap," yelled an old salt from the wharf. "It's goin' to blow like blazes afore midnight, and that old hulk ain't none too seaworthy."

"Let it blow and be blasted!" roared the captain in reply. "She's weathered worse gales nor this is going to be. I'll pull her through or bust."

The rattling cordage drowned the old man's reply. The rising sail bellied out before the wind. The waters began to ripple under the Rover's forefoot. They were fairly off for blue water and a harbor.

CHAPTER III.

A PUFF FROM THE NOR'WEST.

THE Rover bowled along merrily up the lake, under full sail, and with a fair wind from the southward. The nor'wester promised by the signal service had not yet put in an appearance, though the weather-prophets of that inland sea could already see indications of a change. There were peculiar lines in the sky, and movements in the clouds, that brought more than one shake of the head from the crew of the Rover.

Besides the amateur mate and Captain Sparks this crew consisted of four men, and very rough-looking customers they were, as Dick quickly told himself.

It was not that they were weather-beaten, wrinkled, and sun-parched. All that he expected. But there was something evil in their countenances, something of the aspect of men who would not be scrupulous in the doing of any villainous deed. Dick looked at them in succession, and shrugged his shoulders meaningly, as he walked forward and stood with his eyes fixed in reflection upon the lake, that spread in a long silver plain before him.

"I don't see to the bottom of this business," he muttered, "but maybe I've played the fool to come aboard this craft. There's something in the wind that I'd give my cap to know. What made Howard Brown kick so hard against my coming East? And when I let him see that I meant business what made him so anxious to have me call on Gordon of Chicago? Hang me, if I believe either of these men love me. Old Gordon acted as if he'd taken a dose of ipecac by mistake. And why did he send me aboard this rotten old hulk, with a hang-dog crew, and a State's prison bird for captain? There's devilry in the wind, I'll bet high on that. You've got to keep your weather eye open, Dick Dashaway. These chaps mean you no good."

Dick continued to look reflectively over the lake. The scene was one such as had never met his eyes before. The long sweep of clear waters, wrinkling before the wind, and heaping in masses of foam under the plunging cutwater of the schooner; to the west a faint line of green coast; afar to the south-west a cloud-like and shapeless mass, representing the distant city; to the east only a shoreless stretch of water; under foot only the quivering deck planks; overhead the bellying sails and creaking spars; no wonder a look of surprise and admiration came into the young man's eyes, which had been only used to the prairie level and the mountain heights.

"I know as much about blue waters as a cat-bird knows about horse-chestnuts," he continued. "Gordon has put me here under pension. But what for? He owes me nothing. There's been queer things gathering about me for the last three months."

He took a letter from his pocket and cast his eyes dubiously upon the direction, written in a bold but rude hand:

"FOR RICHARD DASHAWAY.

To be opened only on his 21st birthday."

His brows contracted and his lips pursed as he continued to gaze upon this document.

"My 21st birthday! And that's a month off yet. I'd give something rich to know what is in this precious envelope, which I was to freeze onto as though it was full of diamonds. There's a mystery hanging over my life, and I begin to fancy that I've got enemies that were my enemies before I was born.—But let the world wag. I'll have my fling, or bust. Dashing Dick ain't the sort to be put down by every kicking cock-sparrow, and some of them may find that out if they try their games on me."

Dick's lips shut like the valves of a steel-trap.

There was a dangerous look upon his young face. Youth as he was, he evidently was not the sort to be played with.

Putting his letter carefully away, he walked aft among the crew, who had been casting many a curious glance at their odd passenger, who looked as out of place there as a cat in a strange garret.

"How goes it, Cap?" asked Dick cheerily. "Are we making good headway?"

"Ay, ay!" hoarsely growled the old mariner. "The city's near dropped down to the south'ard. The Rover's no fool of a sailer, and with this wind—! But there'll be a change afore night-fall."

He shook his head as he looked to the horizon. "That nor'wester is coming?"

"Yes. There's a puff of it in yon low bank of clouds, here off Reedy P'int. We'll have to double reef, and fight our way into the wind, afore the night's old.—Hey! you tarry son of a screech-owl! What the blazes are you doin' with that sheet?"

The quick-tempered captain strode angrily forward to the delinquent mariner, whom he had thus politely addressed, and left Dick to shift for himself.

But the young man had come on board the Rover to study the art of navigation, and he began the duty at once. There was not a rope tightened, not a shift of the rudder, not the setting of a sail, but his keen eyes were upon it, and his strong hands ready to take part if necessary.

He asked countless questions of the crew, but with a reckless dash, and a flavor of western humor, that won over the surliest of them, and that first afternoon found Dick rapidly advancing in the rudiments of the art of navigation. He had learned the names of every rope, and of almost every plank of the vessel, and the meaning of all the simple maneuvers which a fair wind called for.

As for climbing he was a very cat. Not a sailor of them could go up the shrouds faster than he, or was more ready to daringly expose himself on the swinging spars.

"This is baby's play," cried Dick contemptuously. "I've roped it, hand over hand, up a hundred foot precipice before now, without a quiver in head or finger. Your rope ladder is as easy as a stone stairs."

The cheery, dashing way of the youth was evidently telling upon the sailors. The surly looks with which they had first met his advances quickly changed, and it was not long before smiles took the place of frowns.

Captain Sparks did not seem to like this state of affairs. A dark expression came upon his surly face. It was plainly not his cue to have his intended victim make friends with the sailors.

"Avast there, you black-jawed land-lubber!" he yelled to one who was holding a conversation with the youth. "Where's your eyes, blast you? A river sailor would know better than to take a turn like that on a cleat."

The sailor sprung to the loosening rope, while Captain Sparks turned sullenly to his amateur mate.

"See here, Mr. Dashaway, this won't do," he angrily declared. "You'll spoil every son of a tinker aboard the Rover, if you're goin' to spin street yarn with them at this rate. You weren't sent here for talk, but for l'arnin'. If there's anything you want to know come to me for instructions. Why, Lord! you'll jist have them men as perk as so many robins. Hang if I'm goin' to have my crew spoiled to please your notions."

"I've got to ask questions of somebody," replied Dick coolly. "How else is a chap to learn his trade? Here's a question I'd like to ask now. What makes you hang so close in to the western shore? We've lifted it in the last hour till the whole line is above water. Is that the way to meet a nor'wester, by keeping a coast line under your lee?"

Captain Sparks opened his eyes wide and glared oddly upon his questioner. He attempted a reply, but made a confused medley of it. Dick repeated his question, with a look of innocent inquiry in his face.

"Dang your eyes, man!" roared the captain, with a sudden burst of spleen. "You humbugged old Gordon when you said you never set foot on a deck afore. Where are you steerin', Joe?" he yelled, angrily, to the helmsman. "Are you wantin' to graze the sand-spit off Spikes Head? Wear off three p'int's to the east'ward, and be hanged to you! And keep your peepers open sharp, my cove, or I'll help your eyesight!"

Captain Sparks did not seem quite at his ease

as he turned again to his amateur mate. Dick's shrewd question had in some way interfered with his plans.

"We allers strike for the short cut," he explained. "Arter we round yonder headland the shore pays off west'ard and there's a clear offing. But it was judgmatical in you. I don't want no touch and go grazin'. Step down below, Mr. Dashaway. Grub's ready, and I'm as hungry as a lark."

The supper which Dick found set in the cabin of the Rover was a more appetizing one than he had expected to enjoy on board that sorry-looking craft. The fresh air of the lake had given him a fierce appetite, and he was prepared to do full justice to the meal.

"Jist wait one minute," said the captain. "I forgot somethin' on deck. I'll be back in a jiffy."

Dick seated himself, with his eyes fixed on the table, while dubious thoughts about the captain's odd way of answering his question ran through his mind.

"Is the fellow trying to run the boat ashore?" he cogitated. "If I am no sailor I know a mast-head from a marling-spike, and can't be sold with a Mother Goose's story. I say it again, there's devilry afoot."

Captain Sparks quickly returned. There was a moody look in his eye, which quickly disappeared, however, when he set himself earnestly to the business of the table.

Dick was in one of his liveliest humors, and rattled and jested till he even drew smiles to the leathern visage of the sour-faced mariner.

"Don't know where you got that beef, Cap. It's as tough as the steak of an old grizzly. And that's a bit of meat that ain't often tasted," remarked Dick, as he chewed faithfully on a tough morsel.

"Don't know nothin' about grizzly steak," growled the captain, over his place.

"Bless you, old fellow, there's few that does. The grizzlies know a good deal more about human steak. It's pull Dick, pull grizzly, between man and bear. But I've dropped my ten-year-old.—Pass the bread, captain. Ever been in the Rockies?"

"No, and never want to be."

"You know nothing about life, that's all.—Hillo! what's that?"

This exclamation was called forth by a quiver and reel in the vessel, that almost sent the dishes flying from the table.

"Nothing. The wind's shifted, that's all. Maybe you'll know something 'bout life afore an hour's over."

"The nor'wester?"

"Jist so. Set still. The boys can handle her yit. I never b'lieve in cutting my supper short for a capful of wind."

Dick was not quite so much at his ease, though he would have bit his tongue out rather than show it. The vessel was already heaving and plunging heavily. The gale had struck her nearly head on, and to his unaccustomed ears the groaning hulk seemed as if she would strain herself asunder.

But he continued to keep pace with the worthy captain at the duties of the table, with as much nonchalance as if he had been sitting in a Chicago eating saloon.

He continued his chat about the West as coolly as though it had never been interrupted, and apparently paid not the slightest attention to the labored motion of the vessel.

Captain Sparks bit his lips. He had been playing with the landsman, but soon found that he had met more than his match.

"The devil take the Rocky Mountains!" he exclaimed at length, with sudden spleen. "There's a stiff nor'wester whistling through the riggin', and you've got nothin' to blow about but the Rocky Mountains. Guess I'll streak for the deck."

"You're not going to fly your colors, eh, Cap?"

"I'm wanted on deck," answered the captain surlily, angry that he had been beaten at his own game. "And if you want to see a schooner handled in a gale you'd best streak up too."

Dick laughed merrily after the mariner had disappeared.

"Played it on the wrong man," he exclaimed. "He will have to choose his timber better in future."

Bound not to appear in a nervous hurry Dick suffered a full quarter of an hour more to elapse before he made his way up the dark cabin stair to the deck.

His first feeling was one of surprise at the marked change which had taken place since he went below.

Darkness had come over the sky and the

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lake, a darkness shot through as yet with faint streaks of twilight, which the heavy, driving clouds were rapidly blotting out. No sign of a coast line was now visible; nothing in fact but heaving waters, while the eye could penetrate scarcely twenty yards from the vessel. Through the rigging whistled a high wind. It was hardly a gale as yet, but the successive puffs grew stronger with every minute, while the old schooner sprung fiercely forward into the teeth of the storm, close drawn, and running as sharply up to the wind as possible.

A reef had already been taken in the sails, but it was evident that if the storm increased the Rover could not long bear the spread of canvas which she still displayed. Captain Sparks was giving his orders with the short, decisive tone of the experienced mariner. Yet it was evident to Dick that he was not at his ease. The keen eyes of the youth could see that some secret trouble was busy in the old fellow's mind.

The hours passed slowly on, the vessel holding herself staunchly up to the wind, and driving in a long tack across the lake. Before midnight the foresail was furled, and a double reef taken in the main. But the old craft labored and groaned yet. It was evident she still had too much spread of canvas.

"Lay aloft there to furl topsails!" yelled the captain. "Lively, lads! Lively! Let her head drop off a pint, Joe. Away with ye, my hearties!"

It was no easy task to perform in that gale, and the men had their hands full. The foretop-sail was safely furled, but the main defied their efforts. Dick ran nimbly up the shrouds.

"If I'm to learn navigation," he cried, "I'd better begin at the mast's head than on the quarter deck."

He was just in time to save a man from being hurled overboard by the switching sail. The gripe of his right hand on a stay line had been torn loose, and only Dick's hasty clutch at his waist-band saved him from being torn from the spar by the bellying canvas, and flung adrift into the seething waves.

"Hold your level, my hearty!" cheerily cried the athletic youth. "There's better footing here than yonder."

The rescued man, a short, broad-built, hard-featured fellow, gave Dick a look of gratitude through the darkness.

"A hand in the dark's wu'th summat, mess-mate," he replied. "I'll sarve ye the same sauce yet, afore the storm blows out, maybe."

Dick's aid, awkward as it was, proved efficient, and the sail was soon under control.

Wearing to the port tack they stood again up the lake, plunging through the heavy night. It was not so dark as earlier in the storm. The cloud rack had been blown away, and the sky was studded thickly with stars, which cast their faint light upon the foaming white caps of the waves, and on the slippery deck, kept wet with flying spray. Occasionally the deep-set vessel shipped a sea, which swept her from stem to stern, but she proved a better sailer than Dick had fancied, and held her own bravely against the wind.

And so the night passed on, and the first faint beams of morning twilight shot across the heaving lake.

"You wanted a taste of sea life," hissed the captain into Dick's ear, as the latter stood with his eyes fixed in a fascinated look upon the billowy waves. "You've got it now. How do you like it?"

"We've got to take the thick with the thin," answered Dick, with a meaning shrug.

At this moment one of the men made his way aft, with a scared face.

"What's afloat?" demanded the captain.

Dick's eyes were, just then, fixed upon his countenance, and noted something there which he did not quite like.

"The Rover's strained her sides open, sir. She's taking water fast! There's a foot in the run now, if there's an inch!"

"The devil!" yelled Captain Sparks. "With our load we'll go down in an hour! Ease up on the wheel! Let her fall off a trifle! There's a hull in the wind, I've a notion! Rig up the pumps, lads! Our lives on your muscles, now!"

Dick was watching him as he roared out these orders. He shook his head doubtfully. There was something in Captain Sparks's expression which he could not easily make out.

During the next half hour the lull in the wind became more declared. A gray light now filled the east, the precursor of the coming day. As far as they could see only a wide waste of heav-

ing waters was visible. The men rattled faithfully at the pumps, but Even Dick's untutored eyes could see that the vessel was settling more and more.

"It's gaining on us, Mr. Dashaway," remarked the captain. "We'll have to take a turn at the pumps ourselves. Come below a minute, my lad. A little Dutch courage won't hurt, jist now."

The lad was chilled to the bone, and did not object to the stiff glass of grog which the captain poured him from a burly black bottle.

"Down with it, boy. It won't hurt you in this gale. I'll pay out the balance of the bottle to the men."

Dick, though not accustomed to deep potations, emptied his glass at a draught. Captain Sparks watched him keenly through his cunning little eyes. He replaced his own glass untouched upon the table.

"That's clever, my hearty. Now a-deck with you."

"Ay, ay," answers Dick, in a dazed manner, "I'm good for my turn at—"

He paused, groaned, held his hands for a moment to his forehead, while his eyes sought the face of the captain with a strong suspicion. Then came a reeling step, and he fell prostrate to the cabin floor with a crashing thud.

The villain looked down upon him with a surly triumph in his face.

"You stinging viper, I told you I'd pay you out!" he hissed. "You'd better go to Davy Jones than Tim Sparks go to limbo. In an hour you can follow the Rover's scaly cargo to the bottom. And good-by to Dashing Dick of Dakota."

He rushed to the deck as if he dared no longer stay beside that prostrate form, with its white and lifeless face.

"How does she suck, Joe?"

"It's gainin' fast," returned the sailor, "There's five feet in the hold."

"Then it's good-by to the Rover. We've done our best, lads, but we can't pump Lako Michigan out of her insides. Get out the boat and stand by to lower away."

The men obeyed the welcome order with alacrity. Abandoning the pumps in a body, in two minutes they had the boat over the side and trailing in the water on the lee.

"Lash your helm, Harry. Let her drive as far as she will. It's a rough sea for an egg-shell, but we've got to risk it. Lively, my men! Down with you!"

They were not slow to obey. In a minute more only two men stood on the deck—Captain Sparks and the short sailor whose life Dick had saved at the main-top.

"In with you!" exclaimed the captain. "I must be the last to leave the old Rover."

"But where is Mr. Dashaway?" asked the man. "We can't go without him."

"The deuce! I thought he was aboard! I left him in the saloon junketing over a glass of grog. Down with you! There's not a second to spare!"

"Not without Dick Dashaway!" cried the sailor, stolidly. "He saved my life to-night. I'd die before I'd desert him."

"Stir your stumps then!" yelled the captain, angrily.

Without waiting he caught the line and sprung over the side. In a moment he stood in the prow of the boat, that lay close in on the lee of the driving schooner.

Whether it was by his weight, or from some less innocent cause, did not appear, but the towing line parted at that moment, and in an instant the light boat was adrift. At the same moment the sailor ran wildly from the cabin to the deck of the Rover.

"Hold!" he screamed. "Mr. Dashaway is in a faint. Hold till I bring him up on deck!"

But a look of despair came upon his face as his eyes caught sight of the boat, full twenty yards away, and rapidly pulling back in the heaving foam.

"Too late!" came back in a shrill cry. "The line parted! Fling out a spar! It's your only hope!"

In a minute more the boat was lost in the shadowy distance. The fast settling vessel still drove before the storm, with that despairing form upright upon her stern, and an insensible youth stretched upon her cabin floor.

Dick Dashaway's career seemed ended. Only a miracle could have kept that sinking craft a half hour more above water. And still the wind howled through her sails. And still the waves tossed their foaming caps across her deck. And in the far east the first morning ray gilded the peaks of far-off heaving billows.

CHAPTER IV.

A BELLE OF CHICAGO.

WE must ask the reader to accompany us to a scene far different from that described in our last chapter. From the wild out-door of the lake and the storm we will seek a quiet interior, where all is as soft and tranquil as if winds had never blown and waves never gathered.

It is a boudoir-like room, overlooking a richly-tilled flower-garden, and back almost out of hearing of the constant roar of the Chicago streets. The apartment is charmingly furnished in green and gold, and its walls hung with some bits of painted scenery, that seem jewels in their way. In the corner of a richly-upholstered sofa, at one side of the room, sits a beautiful girl, her fingers actively engaged at a piece of fancy-work, though her dark-lidded eyes are fixed upon another occupant of the room.

This is no other than the merchant, Richard Gordon, a gentleman with whom the reader is already partly acquainted.

"Come, come, Clara," he says, pleasantly, "you are more whimsical than my Maltese cat, and I didn't think she could be surpassed in that particular!"

"And you are as mean, uncle Richard," laughed the girl, "as mean as—I don't know where to find a comparison for you. Unfortunately I have no Maltese cat."

Mr. Gordon laughed heartily at her retort.

"There is no matching you, girl," he cried. "What is that your fingers are playing at now? I believe they are never still."

"You know the proverb. I had better be crocheting, than doing the work which Satan finds for idle hands. But come, uncle," coaxingly. "I only want a twenty dollar bill this morning. And I'll be ever so economical."

"I wish you were married," he answered, with a comical sigh. "It would need a national bank to keep you going. Why don't you look up some tender youth with a long purse—"

"And short brains," she broke in. "No, no, I thank you. If I must marry, it will be a man, not a money-bag. Now I saw a youth the other day—a perfect Apollo. There never were such eyes, and such a face and figure. Yet he was only a rough Westerner, and dressed in the rude fashion of a frontiersman."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Gordon, with a sudden indrawing of his breath.

"There was the freshness, the broadness, and the spicy flavor of the untamed West about him," she enthusiastically continued. "But it wasn't that took my eyes. It is strange what a likeness the young gentleman had to me. To think of it! A wild plainsman daring to look like one of the belles of Chicago!"

"A remarkable coincidence," returned Mr. Gordon, with a look of some dissatisfaction. "How much did you say you wanted?"

"I could make good use of a fifty."

"You said a twenty."

"Then why did you ask me, and rouse my sleepless cupidity? Give me the twenty then, and I will let you alone for one whole week."

"I think I shall go East for a month," he rejoined, with a cunning look.

"If you do you'll find me on your return like Flora McFlimsey, with nothing to wear. There: I'm ever and ever so much obliged. I shall be rich now for three days to come." She followed him to the door, and gayly grasped his hands. "And do look me up my western youth. If I am to go into the matrimonial market I prefer a poor Apollo to a rich ninny."

"You goose!" he replied, pinching her cheek. "I see I must hunt you up a respectable lover; for you are not to be trusted."

But the smile faded from his face on reaching the street, and was replaced by a dark frown.

"A coincidence indeed!" he muttered. "Was there ever such an awkward chance? I knew how it would be. Fortunately the danger is passed now. Dashing Dick is safe at the bottom of Lake Michigan, and Clara can look elsewhere for a lover. Ah! if the girl only knew all."

He walked onward, revolving dark thoughts, which left their marks upon his face.

"If she too were gone!" was the thought that passed through his scheming brain. "There's something bewitching about the girl—but—but she is in my way. I am never safe while one of the brood is above the earth.—If she were but gone!"

He walked on lost in dark thoughts. Were they thoughts of fraud, or murder? He hardly knew himself. He hardly dared let them take shape, even in the inmost recesses of his plotting brain.

An hour afterward found him at his office. Several persons awaited him there, among them

Captain Sparks, and two of the crew of the Rover, whom we last saw battling the waves in a frail boat. There were two other persons present, gentlemanly but business-like individuals.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Flint. How do you do, Mr. Dove? Hope I haven't kept you waiting? I had a little delay."

"We have not been here long," answered Mr. Flint. "So these good fellows formed the crew of the Rover?"

"How d'ye do, Captain Sparks? I did not notice you.—Yes, these are the brave tars who fought the waves for ten hours, in a frail boat, after their stanch vessel had foundered in the gale."

"Not all the crew," corrected Captain Sparks. "Two good fellows as ever trod deck went down with the wheat. Poor devils!"

"How was that?" asked Mr. Dove. "Two men lost? That's bad."

"The line parted," explained the captain. "We had to leave them on deck, for all Chicago couldn't have made the Rover ag'in. You never seen such a tough row as we had. We struck land at Beechy Inlet about noon, but we'd have struck bottom only the wind lulled."

"And the vessel was sinking when you left."

"She'd five good feet o' water in then, and was beginning to lurch heavy. We didn't see her go down, but it wasn't in her to keep up ten minutes arter we left the pumps."

The conversation continued for some ten minutes longer, until every circumstance of the wreck had been drawn from the captain and his men, except the one little circumstance about the strange fainting-fit of Dashing Dick.

"What was the Rover's tonnage, Mr. Gordon?" asked Mr. Flint.

"Three hundred and twelve."

"And your cargo?"

"Twenty thousand bushels of No. 1 spring wheat."

"Ah! And you have twenty-five thousand insurance in the Equitable on the boat. He has your company for the wheat, Mr. Dove. How much are you in for?"

"Twenty thousand."

"That's not near the value of the cargo," Mr. Gordon glibly explained. "Twenty thousand spring, at one-twenty-five per bushel, is a clean twenty-five thousand dollars. And the Rover was not insured to half her value."

"Was she a stanch craft?"

"Stanch and sound in hull and spars."

"Not to speak of the poor fellows who went down in her," remarked Captain Sparks, with a great show of feeling. "I'd give the vessel and her cargo to see poor Dick Dashaway safe on dry land again."

"And I would add the insurance to boot," exclaimed Mr. Gordon.

"I'll take that last," came a cheery voice from the door. "As for the vessel and cargo, I wouldn't give a coyote for the lump."

And to the utter consternation of the speakers in walked no less a person than Dashing Dick, sound in wind and limb, and with all his old reckless abandon of manner.

CHAPTER V.

THE WRECK OF THE ROVER.

How Dashing Dick came to so opportunely put in an appearance, is certainly a reasonable question from the reader. We left him last in a sinking hulk, far off from shore, with a howling storm aloft, and he drugged and insensible below. It may seem scarcely credible that he could, three days afterward, walk into a Chicago office, safe and sound.

Yet there has many a stranger thing happened in the history of mankind, and Dick's escape was not so mysterious as it may seem. With the reader's permission we will return to the deck of the Rover and follow up her history after the flight of Captain Sparks and his crew.

Fortunately for Dick Dashaway, the man who had been deserted with him was the most efficient of the crew. It was a hardy old salt who had sailed the lake for a lifetime, and knew its every whim as a scholar knows his book. And it would have been hard to find a man who knew the points of a vessel better than old Jack Brace.

"With our only boat adrift, a settlin' hull underfoot, and a half-dead man in the cabin, it's a blue look-out," cogitated old Jack. "It's little line the old chap has to pay out, but he's a baby that a'n't make a hard fight for his life."

The helm had been lashed, the sheets tight drawn, and the schooner was still driving on her larboard tack, but more heavily with every minute as she settled deeper in the water.

"If I had Mr. Dashaway on his feet ag'in, mebbly I could do summat," muttered Jack.

To think with the old tar was to act. Hastily drawing a bucket of water from the slashing waves, he rushed to the companionway, and dashed it in a chilly flood into the face of the prostrate man below.

A tinge of color had already returned to Dick's face, and a fluttering breath was on his lips, when this drowning dash took him full in mouth and eyes. It was the needed remedy. His stupor suddenly vanished under the shock, and with a sputter and groan he rose half upright upon his elbow, just as Jack reappeared with another full bucket.

"Hold, you infernal reprobate!" roared Dick, with a sudden outburst of rage, as he strove to escape the dashing flood.

Too late, however. The water was flung with a sure hand, and drenched him from head to foot, with the good effect, at least, of washing away the last dregs of his stupor.

A short, hoarse laugh came from the old tar's lips at the expression on the countenance of his victim. He dashed forward, as Dick sprung to his feet and bounded up the companion stairs in pursuit.

"Run, you jack-rabbit, for if I don't fling you overboard I'm a donkey!" yelled the irate youth, bounding forward in the wake of the old sailor.

Jack wheeled, still laughing, around the mainmast, and then held up his hand in demand for a truce.

"Hold yer level, shipmate!" he cried. "We've got no seconds to spare in boy's play jist now. The Rover's settlin' like mad, and we'll be adrift on the lake afore ten minutes."

In response to his words the wind, which had lulled, howled past in a fresh squall, which made Dick catch at the nearest rope for safety.

"You took such a ridik'lous time for a faint," continued Jack. "I had to swash you back to yer senses."

Dick cast his eyes widely over the heaving seas. Twilight was now merging into daylight, and the tossing, foam-topped waves could be traced for miles.

"What do you call that?" exclaimed the youth, pointing to a glitter of light afar off to the south-west.

"Land, as sure as I'm a livin' sinner! It's the first sun-ray touchin' the oak-tops on Tecumseh's Nose, which is the name of a high hill a mile or so back from the lake. We're not more nor ten miles from shore, and if we kin keep the old hulk afloat fur twenty minutes we mought run her cutwater inter the beach. Stand by to let fly that mainsail sheet when I give the word, Mr. Dashaway. I'll put her afore the wind, and we'll make a break fur it."

The old tar dashed aft to the helm, drawing his knife as he ran. In a minute more he had cut the lashing and grasped the wheel.

"Now, let fly!"

Dick quickly loosened the confining rope that held the heavy sail athwart the wind. The boom swung out at right angles to the mast. Instantly the Rover's head payed off in obedience to helm and wind. Her crashing bounds into the waves ceased, and she ran smoothly before the gale, with twice her former speed.

"Good!" roared old Jack. "The Rover's a prime sailer, I'll say that. But she's settlin', settlin'." He shook his head dubiously. "If we could set the foresail now, she might do it."

"Then we will set the foresail," exclaimed Dick. "Come, old lad, we've got muscle enough to fight a lake gale, when it's life or death. She'll steer herself before the wind."

Jack hastened to obey. Taking advantage of a slight lull, which opportunely came at that moment, the furling lines were rapidly cut, and the two men put all their strength to the lift. Dick's athletic youth vied with the iron muscles of the old sailor. Quickly the gaff ran up, under their united strength. It was half-way up to the mast-head when there came a keen blast that caught the heavy folds of the sail, and bellied it out like a huge sack. A fierce strain—a crash—a rending of canvas—and in a minute the strong sail was streaming in whiplashes before the wind, as if cut into strips by the keen blade of the gale.

"Let her drop," exclaimed old Jack, with a sigh. "We'll have to trust to the main, and the jibs. There's only one chance left us now, Mr. Dashaway. She is flyin' like an arser, and if we kin keep her up for ten minutes more—"

"How is it to be done?" asked Dick.

His eye was fixed on the whirl of waters into which they were driving, and on the harbor of refuge ahead, where the shore-line now lifted plainly under the sunbeams. But the hull of

the Rover had sunk until she now lay like a log on the waves; and the swelling mainsail threatened, with every minute, to follow the fate of the fore, and be blown clean out of its bolt-ropes.

"The pumps," cried Jack. "It's our last hope. If we kin gain five minutes with the pumps we're safe ashore."

Dick was not long to take the hint. Within a minute the two pumps, which had been abandoned by the crew scarce ten minutes previously, were again clanking, with all the vigor of arms nerved with the fight for life.

Rills of water streamed across the deck. But brooks of water seemed to pour into the vessel through her parted timbers. Despite their utmost efforts they could feel her slowly settling beneath their feet. The waves through which they ran crept inch by inch up her broad sides, and toppled, as if in scorn, over her bulwarks.

"It's all up!" cried Jack. "The hatches will blow out in a minute more! We'll have to ship a spar and trust to luck."

"Stick to your pump!" exclaimed Dick, in tones of stern command. "When she's goes down it's time enough to fly our duty. We're not a mile from shore at this minute."

Clank, clank, clank, as if wielded by giants, went the pump-rods. The water poured in a constant stream across the decks. Rapidly the coast-line lifted. It looked, in the lurid light, as if one could almost fling a biscuit ashore. A minute—two minutes—crept in slow seconds by. Then came a thunder-like crash, as the imprisoned air burst the main hatch from its fastenings, and the vessel reeled as if struck by a mighty hand.

The next instant there came a still more thundering crash. The two men were dashed with terrible force, to the deck. The mainmast broke short off, under the pressure of its sail, and was hurled straight forward, carrying the foremast with it in its fall. The falling cordage struck the deck with whip-like cracks. From the stern a topping sea curled over and swept the low-lying deck.

Old Jack was the first to scramble to his feet, and cling desperately to a rope.

"The Rover has struck!" he yelled. "She's run her nose six feet deep inter a bank o' mud! Where are ye, Mr. Dashaway! The shore's not a hundred yards away, and mebbe we mought fetch it."

Dick, less ready than his companion, had been lifted by the billow, and dashed into the fore-castle of the wreck. Here, fortunately, his hands seized one of the swinging stay lines, which sustained him while the remnant of the wave passed on.

Another billow, and the Rover lifted and dashed several feet further on, settling again with a heavy crash into the bar, or bank, on which she had struck.

It was a fortunate movement for the two shipwrecked men. The vessel had been lifted upon the clay bank beneath her until her prow stood several feet high, while her stern dipped below the waves. The wreck of the fallen masts still lay lengthwise the deck, held in place by the back stay-lines, which had not parted.

"What think you of the gale?" asked Dick of the old mariner, who had now made his way forward. "I fancy the wind has gone down during the last ten minutes."

Old Jack turned his weather-beaten face toward the northward, and peered long and earnestly into the face of the gale.

"It's near blowed itself out," he at length announced. "There's not a capful left where it comes from."

"Then we'd best stay where we are," declared Dick. "The wash hardly reaches here, and she'll hold together if the wind sinks."

"That's sound logic," agreed the old tar. "I wouldn't insure no man's life in that boil," pointing to the mad dash of the breakers upon the shore, and the foaming turmoil of their return. "We'd best hang on here while a plank holds together, and whistle for a calm."

Crouched under the keel of the foremast the two men were somewhat sheltered from the waves, which broke heavily every minute over the sunken stern, but lost much of their strength ere they reached the uplifted prow. The wind was still high, and as far as they could see across the lake was only a heaving turmoil of foam-capped waves, gilded now by the rays of the risen sun, which had lifted its welcome face above the eastern horizon.

An hour, two hours, passed. The squally wind had now sunk into a steady but not violent blow, and the waves struck every minute with less violence.

"Guv us yer hand, Mr. Dashaway," cried Jack, rising from his recumbent posture. "If you are a green 'un, you've proved yerself a man to-night, and I like men. Guv us yer hand."

The old man pressed Dick's hand with a hard gripe, and looked steadily into the frank, dark eyes of the youth.

"We've come through the gale together, and we're chums, straight on. I ain't furgot the sarvice ye did me in the blow last night. I mought pay it back to ye some day."

"If you don't, Jack, I'll take the will for the deed," answered the youth pleasantly.

"And now I've got summat to look arter," announced the old tar, with a grim set of his lips. "I've my s'picious 'bout the way that there boat struck adrift."

He walked to the low-lying waist of the vessel, which was still dashed by the white curl of the waves. The severed towing line dangled yet over the side. Jack drew it in, hand over hand, until he had the loose end clutched in his horny fingers. This he inspected closely, with wrinkled brows.

"Come here, Mr. Dashaway. D'ye see that?"

"What?" asked Dick, looking curiously at the wet and straggling strands of the rope.

"Can't ye see, it's no break? *It was a knife parted that rope.* I've allers doubted Cap Sparks; but I didn't think he were up to murder."

"I was to be drugged, and left to drown!" cried Dick, with a sudden revelation of the truth.

"The wind sets that way," answered Jack, with stern brevity.

"Then by all that's good, they shall find that they are barking up the wrong tree, before they are done with Dick Dashaway."

The youth set his lips firm, while a dangerous look came into his eyes.

"The game is opening," he muttered. "I am one against three; Brown of Dakota, Gordon of Chicago, and Sparks of Lake Michigan. But I'll mate the three of them yet. Are you with me, Jack Brace, on a pinch?"

"Yes. Fur life or death."

The two shipwrecked men again clasped hands, in token of their earnest compact. That night's work had wrought their lives together into a strange union.

It was now high morning. The waves had so far settled that it might be safe to venture upon them. They were on the point of doing so, in fact, when they observed a boat put off from the shore.

There was a fisherman's hut on the coast near by, and the wreck had been long observed, though only now had the two men been visible from the beach.

Willing hands soon laid a broad-bottomed boat in the lee of the stranded vessel.

"Drop a line, my good souls, and we'll have you on shore in a jiffy," exclaimed one of the oarsmen.

They were as good as their word. In ten minutes more the sturdy boat broke through the barrier of breakers, which still rolled heavily ashore, and ran up high and dry on the muddy shore-line.

We need not linger over the subsequent events. It will suffice to say that the next morning, at an early hour, Dick Dashaway and Jack Brace made their way to the nearest railway station leading to Chicago, none the worse, but much the wiser, for their harsh experience.

CHAPTER VI.

DICK MAKES A SENSATION.

"I'll take the insurance; but for the vessel and cargo I wouldn't give a coyote for the lump," repeated Dick Dashaway, walking as coolly into Mr. Gordon's office as though he had stepped out only a minute before.

But his quiet entrance produced as great an effect there as though a cartridge of dynamite had exploded in the midst of the persons present.

They all sprung hastily to their feet, Mr. Gordon as white as a sheet, while Captain Sparks's hair stood on end with fright. As for the two seamen, they crouched back into a corner, with their eyes half starting from their heads. The only quiet persons present were the two insurance agents, and with them surprise took the place of consternation.

"Bless your eyes, gentlemen, I'm not a ghost," remarked Dick pleasantly, as he serenely took a chair and flung his hat lightly on the table.

"If you want to see if I am flesh and blood, or only a shadow, just bite my arm," and he held out his muscular arm for inspection.

A hoarse growl, that was half oath, half cry

of alarm, came from the old captain, who seemed utterly unnerved by this apparition. But the merchant had his feelings more under control. After a moment's consternation he dashed forward, and seized Dick's extended hand.

"Thank Heaven!" he cried, with a great show of gratification. "Poor boy, I thought you were gone. I never expected to see you on dry land again."

By this time the dismayed captain recovered himself sufficiently to grasp Dick's other hand.

"It's old Dick, in good earnest," he exclaimed. "He's not meat for fishes arter all! But how the blazes you got ashore gits me."

"Young Dick, if you please," replied the youth, somewhat curtly withdrawing his hands. "One night in a nor'wester isn't enough to put old flesh on young bones. And as to how I got ashore that's easily settled. I came ashore in the Rover. And I'm here to claim salvage for the vessel and cargo."

The consternation of the captain and the merchant at this news was no less than they had shown at Dick's appearance.

"The Rover ashore!" yelled the astounded captain. "It's a dead impossibility! Why she hadn't ten minutes life in her when we left her, a good twenty-five miles out. She'd a hole in her bottom as big as a barrel-head, and the wind pounding her down like mad. It's a clear dodge, blast my peepers if it ain't!"

"I suppose I'm a dodge, too," exclaimed Dick, standing upright, and spreading his broad shoulders. "Look at me, and see if I'm likely to be blown ashore like a dead leaf. Tell you what, Cap, the Rover had more than a spread mainsail and a hole in her bottom. She had Dashing Dick and Jack Brace aboard, and they're not the kind that give up easily."

"You're not sayin' that you brung her ashore?"

"I didn't come myself on a fly or on a float," repeated Dick. "I had the solid deck of the old Rover under foot till she plunged her nose into the mud. And I'm here to claim salvage from the owner, or from the insurance companies."

By this time the two agents had sprung eagerly to their feet.

Where did this happen? Where does the wreck lie?" they demanded.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," asked Dick politely, "but what interest have you in the matter?"

"We are the insurance agents."

"Oh! then I'm your man. I'll put you aboard what's left of her at any time you ask."

During this conversation Mr. Gordon had been seated irresolutely in his chair, his face yet pallid, while a series of strange expressions passed over his troubled visage. He now sprung hastily up again.

"No, no!" he sharply cried, "I withdraw my claim for insurance until I have inspected the wreck. I must first find out what the real loss is."

"Exactly," Mr. Flint coldly replied, "and as my company is interested in the result, I claim the privilege also of finding out what the real loss is."

"And I, too," remarked Mr. Dove, with anything but a dove-like expression of countenance. There was a shadow of suspicion in his tone.

"Name your time, gentlemen, and I'm your man," Dick coolly replied, as he rose and donned his broad-brimmed hat. "Make up your party. You can find me at the Oriental. Look for Dick Dashaway, of Dakota, on the register.—Good-day."

He walked to the door with an air as if he had fully completed his business in that quarter.

"Stop, Mr. Dashaway!" exclaimed the merchant, with eager haste. "Where does the wreck of the Rover lie?"

"Not on a deep bottom, nor in a safe harbor," Dick quietly answered. "I couldn't well locate her resting-place, but I'll put you aboard her. At the Oriental, remember, Dick Dashaway, of Dakota, on the register."

And the young Westerner walked nonchalantly from the room, leaving Mr. Gordon biting his lips in spleen. Evidently Dick's reticence had checkmated some plan of his scheming brain.

Dick smiled meaningfully as he walked out into the street, and made his way from the business toward the more fashionable part of the city.

"It was worse than a bombshell; it was a perfect nor'wester," he laughed. "That blow aboard the Rover seemed to have got into old Gordon's office. I'll put them aboard the wreck when they are ready, but I won't promise not to open their eyes. If I keep my wits about me, I think it very likely that I will give them a slight eye-opener."

He continued to laugh quietly to himself.

There was some plan at work in his busy young brain.

But there was another adventure brewing for Dick at that moment, of which he had not yet a remote conception. Chance was working to throw in his way an opportunity to distinguish himself, and also to connect two lives which had hitherto flowed in separate channels.

He had turned into one of the wider avenues near the lake, and was walking leisurely onward, when a sudden loud outcry drew his attention.

It was a fashionable drive, and every minute some handsome equipage rolled proudly by. But the sudden alarm was caused by the vision of a pair of blooded horses, which came tearing down the avenue at a spanking pace, evidently beyond the control of their driver. The vehicle, a light, open coach, contained but one occupant, a richly dressed young lady, and was tossing from side to side in the wild leaps of the frightened horses.

It was a frightful scene. The scared coachman was clearly unable to command his animals, while every person ran hastily from the street, not venturing to make an effort to stop the runaway team.

"It's all right if the fellow will keep them in the middle of the roadway," remarked Dick. "At that pace they will run themselves out in a mile."

"No; the street turns just ahead," answered a bystander. "The lady will be dashed out and killed."

"Then, by Jupiter, I'll risk a leg to save her!" cried Dick, with a firm set of his teeth. "I've brought up mustangs on the jump before now. It will be odd if I can't check a Chicago hack."

"It can't be done!" exclaimed the citizen. "They are blooded stock. They will run you down in a second."

Dick only smiled and set his teeth more firmly. In fact he had discovered something at that instant which confirmed his wild resolution. The imperiled lady was no other than the beautiful girl with whom he had exchanged looks of admiration a few days before.

She was evidently in a state of benumbing fright, and clung desperately to the sides of the light vehicle, her face white as death, her eyes fixed with a look of deep horror.

One moment it looked as if nothing could save her from death. The next instant an alert and athletic form had sprung into the middle of the roadway, in the path of and close before the plunging horses.

It was impossible for them to stop. They had hardly room to even swerve from the statue-like form that stood movelessly before them. A slight swerve was made, but it was only enough to bring the off-horse down thundering on the bold youth.

A cry of dread rose from the pavements.

"Fly! You cannot check them! You will be killed!"

A grim smile was the only reply. In an instant—how it was done no one could tell—the daring youth had the off horse by the bridle, clutching it on both sides close up to the bit, and bearing with all his weight upon the animal's head.

The frightened creature strove fiercely to shake off the incumbrance, but it could as easily have flung off a tiger whose claws had pierced its back. The animal's head was drawn down to its chest by the weight of the clinging youth, and its wild speed quickly showed symptoms of flagging under this incumbering weight.

Another movement, so quickly performed that the eyes of the spectators failed to follow it, and Dick had a firm gripe upon the bridle of the other horse, and was pressing down with all his weight.

"Pull like sin on your lines!" he yelled to the coachman. "We must bring them up before the turn."

The fellow obeyed, and the speed of the runaway team grew less with every second. At this moment there came a cry of warning from the spectators.

"There's the turn just ahead! You will be dashed against the wall!"

With a movement as alert and skillful as those previously made, in an instant Dick had released his hold of the slowed-up horses and sprung several feet to the side, giving himself an outward send by the bridle.

The lady had risen upright in the coach at this cry, and was swaying to and fro, her dilated eyes fixed in terror upon the danger before her.

"Jump! jump!" yelled Dick. "I will catch you!"

The affrighted eyes turned in an instant in the direction of the voice, and fell upon the form of Dashing Dick, standing with parted feet and extended arms in the street below.

There was not a second in which to decide. But the imperiled girl, as if she had some of Dick's own daring blood in her veins, took not a tithe of a second. As if something in the attitude and face of the speaker had given her confidence, she sprung wildly yet lightly from the swaying vehicle, and in an instant had landed in Dick's extended arms.

Firm and strong as he was, the sudden impulse bore him nearly to the ground. But he struggled upright again, just in time to see the plunging horses swerve widely from the blank wall in front, and turn down the angle of the avenue. The violent jerk tossed the carriage over on its side and flung the unfortunate coachman with stunning force on the hard pavement below.

On dashed the horses, their fright renewed by the dangling and rattling vehicle at their heels.

"I hope you are not hurt," said Dick, in a low voice, to the lady who lay quietly in his arms.

"No, no!" she answered, with a shudder. "Please set me down. I am not hurt at all. But I fear that you must be."

Dick answered with an assuring laugh, as he placed her on her feet.

"I am not easily hurt, miss. Those are not the first horses I have brought up from a full gallop."

"But the dreadful risk! The terrible danger!" she shut her eyes, and Dick could feel her trembling like a leaf as she clung to his arm.

"Let me help you to your home, miss," he quietly requested. "You are not yourself yet. Pray take my arm. A walk may help you to bring back your nerve."

A group of admiring and solicitous spectators had gathered around, and the trembling girl was glad to avail herself of Dick's strong arm, to escape from the unpleasant publicity.

"You are not hurt at all?" asked Dick, as he slowly escorted his grateful prize.

"Not at all. But oh! what an escape! And to you I owe my life!"

The susceptible eyes of the youth fell before the dark orbs fixed in glowing gratitude upon them. Dick had never been in such a situation before, but he felt that, on the whole, he rather liked it.

CHAPTER VII.

CAUGHT IN THE TOILS.

WITH a somewhat unsteady hand Richard Gordon carried a glass of brandy to his lips, and drained it. The strong draught seemed to give him instant vigor and nerve, for with a fierce movement he dashed the empty glass to the floor, shivering it into a hundred fragments.

"So shall it be with them," he exclaimed, with a fierce oath. "I have gone too far now to be checked. Exposure would ruin me, and I would sweep a hundred men from my path rather than be ruined. To think of it! After twenty years of security and good fortune, and just as all my schemes are about to be completed, this boy comes up like an evil destiny. Somehow I fear him as I never feared mortal man. He has come upon me like a genius of evil and disaster. And fortune favors him. Water will not drown him. Will fire burn him?"

A look of deadly malignity came upon his face, that gave it something of the Satanic in its expression. He ground his teeth with rage and energy. Turning to the bottle he snatched it up and, in lieu of a glass, took a deep draught from the bottle itself.

"Sparks is ready for anything, and bold enough for anything," he muttered. "If these insurance agents insist on visiting the wreck, and if they discover the fraud, they do it at their peril. They shall not ruin me! By Heaven, they shall not ruin me!"

Pressing his hat firmly upon his brows he strode from the office, his face full of a rigid determination.

"I have that fellow Sparks by the throat," he continued. "He dare not turn upon me, or disobey me. I could hang him at a word. I must see him at once and scare him into my plans."

We need not repeat the details of the interview between the merchant and his unscrupulous tool. It will suffice to say that Dick Dashaway was sought at the Oriental Hotel, and agreed to pilot a party to the wreck of the Rover, said party to consist of the insurance

agents Mr. Flint and Mr. Dove, of Captain Sparks and of one of his men.

Dick had retreated somewhat hastily from the young lady he had rescued, at the door of her residence, though not until she had made him promise to call again and give her an opportunity to thank him. He had got away on the pretense of going to look after the coachman and the horses, but there was something else in his mind.

"It's a confounded shame for a rough plainsman like me to be cutting after a wealthy and educated little witch like that. The girl has touched me somewhere, that's sure. But it's not what they call love. It's something else, though I'll be shot if I know what. There's something in her eyes and face. What is it? Anyhow, I'm not a fit specimen to be running after a lady of her style. Folks stared at us in the street as though it was beauty and the beast, instead of honest Dick Dashaway and a pretty girl. I see I've got to rig myself out in a Chicago swell suit. I'm not such a bad-looking fellow, and I don't think she'd be ashamed of me if I was got up in nobby style."

Dick looked at his handsome face in a mirror-like shop window, and smiled proudly to himself as he passed onward.

"We Dakota boys ain't to be sneezed at," he remarked, with pardonable vanity. "I don't step down before your primest Chicago swell."

His rapid step soon brought him to the scene of the accident. But the coachman had been removed, the crowd had dispersed, and only a fragment or two of the carriage remained in witness of the occurrence. He was not long in discovering that there had been no damage of importance. The coachman had been stunned, but not seriously injured, the horses had been stopped a few blocks further on; only the broken carriage remained of what might have been a deadly accident.

Dick was ready enough, when approached by Captain Sparks the next day, to conduct him to the scene of the wreck. But he was determined not to go without the insurance agents.

"I'll take no stock in any underhand game," he declared. "If all's fair and square on board the Rover you needn't object to them. If all's foul and crooked I'm not your man. I have agreed to pilot them there, and if you don't choose to go along, you can make up a party of your own. We take the morning train out."

"There's nothing wrong about the Rover," replied Captain Sparks, with a dark look in his eyes. "Only I didn't want them chaps bobbing in our wake. You don't s'pose Mr. Gordon'd want anything as weren't on the square?"

"It's neither here nor there what he'd want," answered Dick, curtly. "The Rover is safe from wreckers. I left old Jack Brace there as watch-dog. Mr. Flint and Dove meet me at the train at eleven. You know where to find us if you want us."

The villainous old rogue gritted his teeth as he went out. He was revolving a murderous scheme, but it looked as if his intended victim had been too shrewd for him.

At sharp eleven that morning the northward train left Chicago, having on board Dick Dashaway and the two insurance agents, Captain Sparks and one of his men. The seaman was one whom Dick had noticed as having a most villainous cast of countenance, and who had looked with a snarl at his every movement when on board the Rover.

"What does Cap Sparks want that ugly hound for?" Dick asked himself, suspiciously. "There's some deviltry afoot, I'll bet high. But I've a notion he's climbing the wrong ladder. Let him look out he don't get flung. It will be odd if I don't astonish the honest old tar before he's a day older."

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when they set foot on the point on the lake shore where lay the wreck of the Rover.

The scene was remarkably different from what it had been when Dick left there several days before. Then a fierce wind was howling, the lake was a caldron of heaving waters, ocean-like breakers were dashing upon the shore and curling over the stern of the helpless wreck. Now there was scarce air enough to lift the drooping leaves of the trees, the lake lay as calm as a mirror beneath the afternoon sun, and the dismantled hulk loomed well out of the water, on the mud bank upon which she had struck.

Her bow was full six feet above the lake level. From here her lines sloped steeply down until her stern was less than a foot out of the water. The fallen masts lay yet lengthwise of her deck, stretching far out beyond the bowsprit.

"The vessel is not a total loss," exclaimed Mr. Flint. "She may be lifted and brought into dock."

"Her cargo is spoiled, at any rate," remarked Dick, "and the old hull isn't worth the cost of lifting."

Meanwhile Captain Sparks had succeeded in hiring from the fishermen their only boat. There was but a single family residing in the vicinity of the wreck, there being no others within a mile.

Dick looked around with inquiring eyes for old Jack, but he was nowhere to be seen.

"The old rogue!" he ejaculated. "What has become of him? I didn't think Jack Brace would fly his duty. But you can't tell who to trust. Maybe he has pillaged the cabin and made tracks."

In ten minutes more they were aboard the wreck. The boat, rowed by Captain Sparks and his sailor companion, approached from the northern and higher side, for the vessel careened considerably to the south. Some dangling ropes from the rigging here hung down into the water, and afforded a ready means of climbing to the deck.

In a minute more the whole party had gained the deck of the dismantled vessel. It was a scene of ruin and desolation. The splintered stumps of the masts lifted a few feet above the deck, while all the fore part of the vessel was incumbered by the prostrate spars, the torn and ragged sails, and the network of ropes into which the lines of the spars and sails were twisted.

The deck was slippery with mold, and sloped at such an angle that it would not have been easy to keep footing, but for the aid of these straggling lines. The hatchway was still half-covered by the hatch, which had been torn from its fastenings in the last throes of the struggling vessel. It was the remaining indication of the last step in her fight for life, ere she had been thrown, a helpless hulk, on her final resting-place.

"What think you, Dove?" asked Mr. Flint, after a critical professional survey of the wrecked schooner. "Is there any value left in the craft, or are we in for the full insurance?"

"I fancy you are," answered Dove. "She is only fit for firewood. The old hulk was unseaworthy ten years ago, and was refused in our company. How about the cargo?"

"Not fit for seed wheat, or for bird feed," answered Captain Sparks. "You kin see it here through the hatch. The top layer's dry, but it's soaked below."

Dick had stood aside during this colloquy, his hand resting on the stump of the foremast, his eyes fixed with a keen scrutiny upon the face of Captain Sparks, which evidently did not betoken a mind fully at its ease. Dick was biding his time, like a hound held in leash. He had not made this trip without an object, but he waited quietly until the agents had finished their colloquy, and decided that neither vessel nor cargo were worth the trouble and expense of seeking to recover.

"It is odd what queer luck this Mr. Gordon has with his ventures," remarked Flint, in a sarcastic tone. "This is his fourth wreck, to my knowledge, within ten years."

"And the first that came ashore," answered Dove. "They generally manage to go down in mid lake, cargo and all, except the crews, who are always lucky enough to come ashore with dry skins."

"No one suffers except the insurance companies," continued Flint. "They always have to bear the brunt of Gordon's wrecks."

"And they kin afford to," answered Captain Sparks, sullenly. "I've sailed the lake for Mr. Gordon for twenty years, and no vessel goes down under Tim Sparks's foot while there's a ghost of a chance of saving it. If ye're satisfied gentlemen, we'll put ashore."

"I am," answered Flint. "What say Dove?"

"There's nothing to be done here."

"Excuse me, gentlemen," exclaimed Dick, "but I happen to disagree with you in that opinion. If you are satisfied I am not. I have a crow of some size to pick with our respected friend, Captain Sparks."

"What the blazes do you mean?" cried the captain angrily, but evidently a little disturbed, as he turned hastily to the speaker.

"I hope you don't fancy that this is what I came here for?" answered Dick, with an easy smile. "There's more fish in the pan, friend Sparks, than these easy gentlemen see. Suppose I ask you about the contents of a certain black bottle, from which you were kind enough to give me a drink on a certain night, not long ago?"

"Well, ask away," answered the captain surlily.

"Or about this?" As he spoke Dick lifted up the severed end of the towing line. "See here, gentlemen. This is the line that parted when the boat of the Rover went out into the sea, and left Jack Brace and me to sink with the wreck. What do you think of a parting like that?"

"By heavens, it was cut!" exclaimed Mr. Flint, in a horrified tone.

"It is a lie!" the captain fiercely exclaimed, as he rushed forward and gripped at the rope. "I'll swear an oath that that's not the line. It's an infernal trick!"

"Back!" cried Dick, with equal fierceness. "If you lay hand on me, shoot me if I don't fling you into the lake! I'm the wrong sort to be left to drown, Captain Sparks."

"It's a lie!" growled the villainous-looking sailor. "I'll back Captain Sparks as that's not the line."

"All right, messmate," answered Dick with sarcasm. "I am not quite done yet. If you take my advice, Mr. Flint, you will raise this vessel before you pay the insurance. And for you, Mr. Dove, you will look at more than the top of the cargo."

"What do you mean?" asked the agents simultaneously.

"I mean," answered Dick, drawing himself up, and fixing his eyes sternly on the discomfited captain, "that the Rover did not fill from a strained joint. She was scuttled, gentlemen, and there's the man who did it!" pointing with his finger at the shrinking mariner.

"It is an infernal lie!" growled the latter, though with a greatly disturbed expression of face.

"It is a lie, is it? We will see if the other story is a lie. Come below, gentlemen. You shall see for yourselves of what this valuable cargo consists."

He led the way to the partly opened hatchway, the two insurance agents following with curiosity and doubt in their looks. Captain Sparks also followed, but he first exchanged glances of evil meaning with his surly companion.

The sailor stood leaning against the lifted side of the hatch, while the others went below. Captain Sparks stopped half-way down the ladder which led to the hold.

"Is this wheat in bulk, gentlemen?" asked Dick meaningly.

He pointed to where a lurch of the vessel had shifted the loose wheat to one side, and left bare the top of a canvas bag.

"Is this wheat?"

In a moment he had cut a long slit in the bag, and inserting his hand, drew it out filled with loose sand.

"Do you call this wheat, Captain Sparks?"

"Try deeper, Mr. Dashaway. You will have plenty of time," cried the captain, in a tone of malignant meaning.

In an instant he had leaped to the deck. Dick's quick eyes flashed around. A sharp suspicion came into them. With the bound of a tiger he sprung for the opening.

He was too late. The strong hatch was that instant shot over the open space, throwing them into total darkness. They could hear the sound of iron bars as the strong square of timber was battened down.

"Go on with your investigation, gentlemen," came in mocking tones from Captain Sparks. "It is dark there now, but we will give you some light soon."

"Nothing more was heard. Five minutes—ten minutes passed. The imprisoned men groped blindly about in the darkness, hoping to find an ax or some weapon with which to force their way out. It was in vain. The hold was bare.

And now a peculiar crackling sound came to their ears. Through the open cracks of the forward partition a faint light showed, which grew stronger with every minute. A smell of smoke pervaded the hold. A snarling laugh came through the hatch.

"You shall have light, gentlemen. I hope you'll find something to your liking."

In a minute more the wash of oars came to their ears. The three men looked at each other with horror-stricken eyes.

"Good God, the villain has set the vessel on fire!" screamed Mr. Flint.

"We are doomed!" exclaimed Mr. Dove. "The flames are eating their way back! Oh! why did we let ourselves be drawn into this murderous trap?"

Dick stood silent, with his eyes fixed on the lurid flames, as if in fascination.

And now the smoke rolled back in suffocating volumes. They were doomed! A miracle alone could save them from death!

CHAPTER VIII.

A STRANGER FROM DAKOTA.

"YERE'S yer Mornin' News. Terrible accident! Vessel burnt! Three men drowned!"

Such was the cry given in stentorian tones by a Chicago newsboy, as he hurried along with his bundle of papers.

"Let me have one, boy."

The speaker was a roughly dressed individual, with something of a Western smack in his attire. There was a harsh and unattractive expression upon his face, his thin features having a dried-out look, as if parched by desert winds.

He quickly unfolded and glanced over the newspaper, as if highly interested in news of disaster. There it was, in big type:

"TERRIBLE DISASTER ON THE LAKE!

THE WRECK OF THE SCHOONER ROVER BURNT TO THE WATER'S EDGE.

THREE MEN LOST IN THE FLAMES!

AMOS FLINT of the Equitable Insurance Co.; WILLIAM DOVE of the Home; and RICHARD DASHAWAY, mate of the Wrecked Vessel."

The stranger read no further. He crushed the paper in one hand, and struck the other vigorously upon his knee.

"By the great jumping grizzly, but that's news!" he ejaculated. "Dashing Dick kicked the bucket a ready? I didn't think it was in old Gordon to work the venture at that pace. I must hunt up the old rat. Blast me if he isn't got to pan out!"

Unfolding the paper again he read with avidity the details of the "accident." The full story was told of the visit to the wreck; of an accidental fire that caught to some waste in the fore-castle; of the rapid spread of the devouring flames; of a gush of suffocating smoke into the hold while the visitors were inspecting the condition of the cargo. It concluded by describing the escape of Captain Sparks and Mark Morford, the sailor, while the others had been smothered in the smoke.

"My eyes, but it's lame!" cried the stranger. "Old Sparks is in it, and I admire the accidents that he's got a finger in. Haug me if Gordon isn't a coon!"

While he was making his way toward the office of the villainous merchant, the latter was seeking it from another direction.

He had just before called on his ward, Clara Gordon, and had been met by her with tearful eyes and distressed tones. She held the morning paper in her hand.

"Oh uncle!" she cried in pitiful accents. "I cannot bear to think of it! After his so nobly saving my life! To die such a terrible death! That brave young man!"

"What do you mean, Clara?" asked her uncle. "Who in the world are you working yourself up so about?"

"Do you not know? The gentleman who so boldly stopped those runaway horses, and saved me from being dashed to death from the carriage.—Ah! I cannot bear to think of it."

"Come, come, child, you are all right now."

"Oh mercy! have you not read the paper? Do you not know of that dreadful burning of the wreck? And he—he—my savior! Oh! I dare not think of his dreadful fate!"

"Who?"

"Mr. Dashaway. It was he that saved me. And he has been burned to death in the wreck!"

A sound that was much like a whistle came from Mr. Gordon's lips. He snatched the paper from Clara's hand, and rapidly ran his gloating eyes over the story of the accident.

"Horror upon horrors!" he ejaculated, with a show of great concern. "The Rover burnt! Those three men perished! Why, Clara, it was my own vessel! Excuse me for haste, but I must be at my office immediately. This is a dreadful affair!"

He burst hastily from the house, leaving poor Clara to bemoan the terrible death of her preserver, in whom she could not help but feel a vital interest.

But Mr. Gordon had another object in his hasty departure. He was fearful that the exultation in his heart might display itself in his face.

"What a prime hand that fellow Sparks is!" he ejaculated. "I never knew him to bungle a job. If he has only covered up his tracks well in this affair. It must be made to seem an accident. But I can trust him. This newspaper report is his work. I am safe at last.

Every trace of fraud is at the bottom of the lake, and my evil genius with it. Dashing Dick made a decided mistake when he put himself into the hands of Richard Gordon. I suffer no obstacles in my path."

These exultant thoughts ran through his mind as he hurried toward his office. They were followed by others of a different vein.

"So it was Dick Dashaway that stopped Clara's horses. He had been here but a week, and twice already he and she have been thrown together. Thank the stars he is safely provided for, or there would be no keeping them asunder!"

A few minutes afterward he burst hurriedly into his office, the newspaper still in his hands. He wore a face of concern as he looked quickly around for visitors. But his concern changed to exultation as he saw that the only person present was Captain Sparks, whose hardened and leathery face was wrinkled into a harsh grin.

"Welcome home, captain," said the merchant heartily. "I have read your report. You have done your work quickly. Have you done it well? Is it accident or murder?"

"Accident, accident," said the villain, with a harsh laugh. "There's naught I have a fist in as isn't accident. Mark and me left the Rover blazing like wild, and them men battened down in the hold. It was a cute trick we played on 'em. When I left the coast she was all a sheet of fire. And there wasn't no danger of the fishermen putting off to the rescue, for we had the only boat."

"You didn't wait to see her burn out?"

"No. I left Mark there, fer I had to sail lively to overhaul the train. But the last thing I saw was the flames shootin' up into the sky. There'll be no difficulty 'bout the insurance on the Rover."

The mind of the merchant was full of exultation as he continued the conversation with his murderous tool. That a triple crime had been committed was nothing to him. That his track of villainy was safely covered up was the one thought in his mind.

"You are a jewel, Captain Sparks," he exclaimed. "You shall be well paid for this job. You can't say that I'm a niggard with my purse."

"There's one as can say it then," came a loud voice from the door, and the stranger whom we have seen buying the *Morning News* walked boldly in. "Here's one hasn't seen the color of your cash these ten year."

A frightened look came upon the merchant's face, while Sparks sprung to his feet with an oath.

"Howard Brown!" they both exclaimed.

"Just that very individual," remarked the new-comer, with unshaken coolness. "I run a bit short, and thought I'd take a little trip east from Dakota. I ain't forgot as there's somethin' owing me on a little job as three gentlemen put through 'bout twenty year ago. Old Dashaway has kicked the bucket, but there's a pair on us left at ove ground yit."

He looked significantly at the troubled face of Captain Sparks as he spoke.

"You had the boy there—why didn't you keep him?" asked Mr. Gordon, angrily.

"Cause old Dash kicked loose and went in fur a funeral," replied the imperturbable stranger. "Somethin' must have passed atween him and the boy, fur the lad got wild fur Chicago. I couldn't no more hold him than you could hold in chain lightnin' with a snaffle-bit. As I took it there was trouble afloat, I consigned the headstrong youngster to you."

"It wasn't a bad idea, Mr. Brown. Take a seat."

"I jedged it wasn't when I read this mornin's paper," returned the lantern-jawed Westerner. "When I saw as Cap Sparks had his finger in the pie I wern't long lookin' through that accident."

"What the blazes are you driving at?" yelled the captain, starting up in a rage. "Do you want to hint that—"

"Softly, softly," remarked Mr. Brown. "I reckon as how we know one another pretty much. Mought as well own up the corn, Cap. We're all sailin' in the same boat. And bless your eyes, it wouldn't float long if the weight of three precious rogues would sink it."

Mr. Gordon held up his hand in warning as a step was heard near the door. It opened, and a telegraph messenger boy entered.

Mr. Gordon quickly glanced over the dispatch handed him. But his eyes dilated and an ashen hue spread over his face as he did so. His voice was low and husky, and his hand trembled, as he said to the boy:

"There is no answer."

He looked for a moment into the face of Captain Sparks, with a strange expression, and then sprung to his feet with a hot outburst of rage.

"Oh! you infernal bungler! What is it keeps me from choking you for this spoilt job? By the Lord, if any harm comes to me I'll have you hung, as sure as my name's Gordon!"

"What is it?" faltered the captain, his face growing pallid with dread.

"What is it? Listen to this telegraph dispatch!"

"Beware! The devil is loose! Look out for yourselves."
MARK MORFORD.

"Do you know what that means? Does it need a magician to interpret it? Ah! but you shall sweat for this!"

It would be hard to depict the consternation of the three villains at this enigmatical dispatch. To them it was full of perilous meaning, however it may be to the reader. The scheme of murder had somehow failed. That is what they took from it.

As to how it had failed we must visit the flaming wreck of the Rover to discover.

We left the three intended victims inclosed in the hold of the flaming schooner, without ax or tool with which to force their way out, and the flames rapidly making a road toward them, and sending a flood of suffocating smoke in advance.

It seemed impossible to escape. Their foes had fled from the schooner, and left them to their fate. They looked at each other with starting eyes. Death was advancing step by step, and they saw no way to stay his dreadful progress.

Five minutes of this terrible suspense passed. The flames had eaten their way nearly through the stout board partition, and were darting in long tongues at the dismayed victims through a hundred openings. The boat with the escaping villains must have gained the beach by this time, but long ere rescue could come death by suffocation would be upon them.

Yet at this moment there came a welcome sound from the deck. It was like a heavy footfall. Then there was a clank of iron, as though the fastening of the hatch was being removed. A burst of joyful hope surged into their hearts as these welcoming sounds were heard. And now came a sliding, scraping noise. The heavy hatch was slowly moving back. A beam of the blessed sunlight shot down into the hold, to combat the lurid glare of the flames.

With wild energy Dick sprung to the ladder, and lent his strength to the gliding frame. In a minute it was driven bodily back and an opening a yard wide was made. Through this rushed up the smoke which had made breathing almost impossible.

And framed in this cloud of smoke, as welcome at that moment as an angel's face in a cloud, appeared the weather-beaten visage of Jack Brace, peering anxiously down.

"Are ye below there? Are ye all right?" he eagerly inquired.

His question was answered by the appearance of Dick, who dashed like an arrow from a bow up to the deck, and caught the old fellow in a choking hug.

"All sound, Jack," he exclaimed. "But it was nip and tug. Hey, below there! Stir up!"

His call was answered by the appearance of the other two prisoners, who hastily scrambled to the deck, their faces deathly white. They staggered like drunken men, and fell half choking to the deck.

"Never went through a prairie fire, I fancy," cried Dick. "You came in the nick of time, Jack. But where were you?"

"Laying off here under the lee bow, in a little boat of my own," answered the old tar. "Your boat came up on t'other side. I knowed there was deviltry afoot the minute I heered Cap Sparks's voice. So I jist lay low to let the thing work itself out."

"By Heaven, you didn't stir yourself any too soon then. A few minutes more would have settled our hash."

The flames were now darting up into the air, and gaining food from the cordage and canvas of the fallen masts.

The insurance agents were insensible, and it took a plentiful supply of cold water to bring them back to consciousness.

By the time this was done the flames had full possession of the forward part of the vessel, and were rapidly making their way astern. The heat was growing unbearable.

Old Jack's boat was moored amidships, but he let it fall back to the stern, and with some difficulty aided the two trembling and stagger-

ing agents to enter it. Dick sprung lightly in, with all his old nerve. Jack followed, and cast loose.

"Good-by to the old Rover!" he said, as he grasped the oars.

Some twenty minutes had now elapsed since Captain Sparks and his villainous companion had gained the shore. The former was already far away toward the railroad station.

But what was the dread and astonishment of the latter, who still stood on the shore, to see put off from the side of the burning craft a boat full of men!

It was to his superstitious mind the work of magic, and with a cry of terror he ran hastily away toward a neighboring wood, as the well-laden boat approached the shore.

CHAPTER IX.

FRIENDS IN DISTRESS.

"TWENTY years—twenty long years of crime! And to fail at the end! To utterly fail! And when the prize seemed fully in my hands!"

Richard Gordon twisted his long fingers distractedly together, while his face was filled with dread and dismay.

"There is ruin upon me—utter ruin! If those men safely return? If they tell the story of the fraud and attempted murder? By Heaven, they shall not! I am not at the end of my wits yet. I have it! By all that's good I have it! They shall find that Richard Gordon is no common rogue. With one fell swoop I clear my path and leave no trace behind!"

With the exultation of a triumphant scheme in his plotting brain he hastily seized his hat and hurried into the street. Time was swiftly passing. A lost minute might make him too late. If the insurance agents should once reach their offices his ruin was sure. The story of the scuttled vessel, the fraudulent cargo, the attempted murder! Would he dare face the indignant people of Chicago when once all this became public news? Would they not rush to lynch him for his crimes?

"I have my last card to play!" he muttered. "If it fails I must fly for my life—fly to beggary and shame!"

His face set with the energy of a deadly purpose as he hurried on, revolving the details of a devilish scheme in his busy brain. He was not one to yield while the ghost of a hope remained.

Two hours after he had thus hurried from his office, four men landed from a railroad train, at its final station in the northern district of Chicago. They consisted of Dick Dashaway, the two insurance agents, and the old sailor, Jack Brace.

After their escape from the burning wreck they had remained upon the shore to watch it until its last flaming embers dropped hissing into the lake. It was not long ere nothing remained of the old Rover except that portion of her hull that lay below the water surface. This the next storm would probably send into fragments, and destroy every evidence of fraud.

On reaching the railroad they found that there was no further train for Chicago that night. It was a way station at which but few trains stopped, and Captain Sparks had caught the last of these.

It was nine o'clock the next morning ere they were able to take a train. Hardly had they done so ere Mark Morford emerged from his hiding-place, from which he had watched the movements of the rescued men. He had not dared to approach the depot before, but he now hastened to send the enigmatical telegraph message which had fallen so like a thunderbolt upon the three villainous confederates.

One o'clock was striking from a neighboring clock-tower when the slow-moving train at length drew into the depot, and the rescued men landed, glad to be safe back in Chicago once more.

Hardly had they set foot upon the platform of the station when a young woman in the dress of a servant girl, who had apparently been waiting for the train, eagerly approached Dick.

"Are you not Mr. Dashaway?" she asked.

"That is what some folks call me, when they want to be polite," answered Dick, with a questioning look.

"Then read this. Read it instantly, sir. It is very important."

The young man looked with surprise at the dainty envelope handed him, from which arose a delicate perfume.

"Who sends me this?" he asked.

"You will find out all by reading it. Pray lose no time, sir."

Mr. Flint and Mr. Dove came curiously closer, drawn by her distress of face and attitude.

"Thundering queer!" muttered Dick, as he tore open the envelope. "What does it mean, anyhow?"

In a moment more he had spread open the neatly-folded sheet, written upon in a delicate, woman's hand.

But his look of curiosity changed to one of concern as he read the note. It was as follows:

"MR. DASHAWAY:

"You will deem it strange to be addressed by me, who am merely a perfect stranger to you. But I am in the greatest distress, and do not know where else to seek for aid. I have good reasons for not applying to my immediate friends, and I have not forgotten—I shall never forget—your courage and self-sacrifice. You saved my life once. Oh! will you not aid me again? My uncle and guardian, Richard Gordon, has been treating me shamefully. He has now made me a prisoner in my own house. I do not wish to expose his villainy to my friends. I am too proud for that. But you, sir—you who are a brave stranger—will you not come to my aid, and release me from this base imprisonment? I trust in you! I depend upon you! Bring any friends who may be with you.—And haste! haste! He threatens me with worse. He threatens to remove me where I cannot be found. Oh, come! come! brave, warm-hearted stranger!"
CLARA GORDON.

"P. S.—Do not fail to come, and to bring aid. You might fail if you came alone."
C. G."

Dick stamped his foot with a hot impulse of rage.

"Come? You bet I will come. Who would ever have thought old Gordon was such a villain? So he is guardian to my beautiful maiden. Read that, gentlemen! Will you not accompany me to the rescue? She is the prettiest girl in Chicago; and in the hands of such a villain!"

The two agents read the letter with indignant eyes.

"Is this the smooth-spoken Gordon? Perhaps he may seek to murder her as he did us. Of course we will go with you, and at once. Anything to baffle his villainy. He is coming fast to the end of his rope."

"Thanks," cried the girl. "I will run ahead and tell her you are coming."

The four men set off at a hasty pace. But old Jack soon excused himself. He had another matter which he must look after at once. Could they not do without him?

"Good-by, old chap," exclaimed Dick, feelingly. "You know where to find me; at the Oriental."

"And we have told you where to find us," said Mr. Flint. "We are not going to forget that you saved our lives."

"Bless yer eyes, shipmates, I couldn't help myself," cried the old tar. "If it had been a dog in sich trouble, I'd ha' gone for him all the same."

He walked hastily away, as if to escape from any further thanks.

Some twenty minutes of a brisk walk brought them to the house which Dick well remembered, as that he had conducted Clara Gordon to, after the runaway accident. But he had made the journey longer than was necessary, through lack of acquaintance with the streets of Chicago. Thus the girl had arrived some time in advance, and stood in the doorway as they approached, her face fuller of distress than ever.

"Oh, sirs, why were you not warned sooner?" she cried, wringing her hands in great distress. "My poor mistress is no longer here! She has been removed during my absence! Oh! what shall I do? What shall I do?"

"Removed!" cried Dick. "Do you know where? Have you any idea where? If he has taken her to the ends of the earth we will follow him!"

"I am with you in that," affirmed Mr. Flint, while Mr. Dove looked assent.

"Yes, yes!" she cried eagerly. "I think I can find the place. Come with me, gentlemen. I am sure I know where she is taken."

She eagerly led the way onward, through street after street, followed by the three men, who were worked up into new earnestness by her distress of manner.

"Old Gordon fancies we are drowned, and well out of his way," remarked Mr. Flint, "and that his trick with the Rover has perished with us. He fancies he can go on with his villainous schemes."

"But he has the 'wrong men to deal with,' supplied peaceful little Mr. Dove, with a most warlike countenance.

"Hang me if I don't owe him an eye-opener," exclaimed Dick. "He has tried twice to do for me. If he tries it the third time one of us must go under. And you bet that Dick Dashaway won't pass in his checks easy."

The girl stopped at this moment. "This is the house," she said. "I am sure he has brought her here."

They were in a narrow, little frequented street. Most of the houses were of wood, but the one before which they had stopped was a tall and a firmly built brick structure. It had a massive look which gave them the idea which the girl had applied to it, that of a prison.

"Do not knock or ring," she cautioned. "Follow me softly. I know the way."

She opened the door and led them into the house, making her way with stealthy steps. It came into Dick's fancy that this was on odd way of entering a prison. He thought it a very open prison. But with the consideration that three men would be able to take care of themselves he followed on, suppressing his rising doubts.

Up the stairs to the third floor she led, and back through a narrow passage. Here she opened a door and entered a room, into which they followed her.

A quick cry of surprise and gladness greeted Dick's entrance. His quick eyes caught the face of Clara Gordon, full of mingled delight and astonishment. She rushed eagerly forward and seized his hands with warm impressment.

"You are alive? You were not burned to death as reported? Oh! thank Heaven for that!"

"I should think not," replied Dick, looking oddly back at his companions. "We are not the kind that go under so easily. But did you not know that? It was your trouble that brought us here. You sent for me."

"My trouble? I sent for you?" she repeated, dropping his hands and looking inquiringly from face to face. "I do not know what you mean."

"Yes, your trouble. You were in distress; imprisoned by your guardian."

"I in distress?" She broke into an amused laugh. "Why, what folly is this? Some one must have been playing a trick on you."

"But here is your own note, asking for aid," persisted Dick, a little nonplused.

She cast her eyes rapidly over it, and then cried in a voice of indignation:

"It is a base forgery! I never wrote it!"

"Then there is some villainy afoot. It was brought us by this girl.—Where is she?"

The girl had disappeared.

"She just slipped out that door," remarked Mr. Dove.

"Then, by Jove—" cried Dick, rushing to the door. He stopped suddenly, and turned back with a look of alarm. The door was firmly locked!

"There is some deep devilry afoot!" he cried. "We have been trapped here! We are caged!"

CHAPTER X.

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE SEALED ROOM.

FOR several minutes the imprisoned parties gazed at each other with eyes of alarm. What did this mean? Why had they been lured to this remote street and caged? Was Richard Gordon at the bottom of this trick?

"Richard Gordon?" cried Clara with indignation. "He is my uncle. Why do you bring in his name? He is incapable of crime."

"Excuse me," answered Dick, somewhat sarcastically. "I am not so sure of that. Perhaps you do not know him as we do. Why do we find you here, Miss Gordon? Whose house is this?"

"It is my uncle's house," she replied, with growing alarm. "He sent for me here this morning on some important business. I was told to wait for him in this room."

"You see," answered Dick. "He has some scheme against you as well as us. You are in his way."

"I in his way?" Her eyes dilated with nervous fright.

"See here," cried Mr. Flint, suddenly. "Here is another door, which is not fastened. The villains have made an oversight. We may escape this way."

He flung open the door and rushed out, followed by Mr. Dove. Clara was about to hastily follow, but Dick interposed his arm.

"Not so fast," he cried. "These are not the men to make oversights. There is some trick in this. Hold! let us feel our way."

He advanced cautiously to the door, for the purpose of reconnoitering. But ere he could reach it it was violently closed from without, and the key turned in the lock with a sharp thud.

Clara looked at him with anger and excitement.

"See what you have done!" she exclaimed. "We might have escaped!"

"Not by that door," answered Dick, coolly. "It was a trick, I tell you. Those two hasty fellows have jumped from the frying-pan into the fire. I'll wager my hat on that."

"But, what shall we do?" she piteously appealed, wringing her hands in distress, while her beautiful face was turned beseechingly to his. "Oh! this is terrible! What is to become of us?"

"Keep cool, Miss Clara. There is nothing like that when one is in a scrape. Why, you were in ten times worse trouble that day in the carriage, and you came out all correct. I calculate we'll pull through this. Take a seat and keep cool, while I investigate."

He almost forced her into a seat, and then began a round of the apartment. The room was a small one, and communicated with the rest of the house by the two doors we have mentioned. These doors were not paneled, but were built of solid oak planking, as if with an eye to strength.

Dick examined them critically and shook his head. With no aid to his bare hands it was simply impossible to force them. He tried the strength of the locks, but they were beyond his power.

The only remaining opening to the apartment was a single window. This looked out into the grounds back of the mansion, but it presented a sheer descent of thirty feet, with a stone pavement at the bottom. At one side of the window a long ladder was erected against the house, but its upper extremity was some six feet away, and quite beyond his reach.

He shook his head again. The window was no more promising than the doors. There was nothing in the room that offered any aid. It was plainly furnished, with walls papered in light colors, and a white ceiling. The only opening visible was a small round hole low down in one of the side walls, containing what seemed the extremity of a stove pipe.

Paying no attention to this Dick walked over to where Clara was disconsolately crouched upon her chair. He quietly took a seat by her side, with no more concern upon his face than if he was in his hotel room at the Oriental, waiting for the supper gong.

He took her hand in his, and held it with a firm pressure.

"Excuse me," he said, "but you are frightened. Let me see if I cannot give you some nerve."

She made no effort to withdraw her hand. On the contrary a faint flush crept up into her pallid cheeks, while her eyes rested confusedly on the floor.

"Richard Gordon is your uncle, you tell me," he continued. "And your guardian. Will you tell me something about him? I have a reason for wishing to know the story of his past life."

"There is little I can tell you," she replied, her voice yet trembling with nervous excitement. "All I know is that my father and mother have been dead for many years, and uncle Richard has acted as my guardian. He has always been kind to me."

"Has he much of your money in his hands?"

"Oh! considerable, I think. I am sure I do not know how much."

"What a fine financial agent you would make," Dick smilingly replied. "How old are you, Miss Clara?"

"Eighteen," she answered, with a show of dignity.

"I see. You could not be expected to know much about finances. When you get to be my age—"

"How old are you?" she interrupted.

"I am—well—I will be twenty-one in a few days," he rejoined, with a confused utterance.

"Oh dear me! what a patriarch!" and Clara burst into a merry peal of laughter.

"But—but you know, Miss Clara, we Western boys—Has your uncle much money of his own?" he asked, quite breaking down in his explanation.

"I have been told that he has none," she answered, more seriously. "He was in my father's employment. He has been carrying on his business since his death. But of course in my interest."

"Oh, no doubt. Yet it might prove fortunate for Mr. Richard Gordon if anything serious should happen to you."

In an instant Clara was on her feet, her eyes burning with indignation.

"How dare you, sir?" she hotly exclaimed. "How dare you cast such insinuations against my uncle? I will hear no more such innuendoes! And I despise you for uttering them!"

Dick was confused for the moment by this hot attack, but he quickly recovered his equanimity.

"I do not speak without warrant," he somewhat bitterly replied. "Your indignation is natural. But I have a tale to tell which may open your eyes. Sit down and let me relate what has happened to me during my few days in Chicago."

She rather reluctantly complied, her face full of an expression of haughty doubt. But this look disappeared when the young man rapidly and vividly told the story of his Chicago life, and of the two base attempts that had been made upon his life.

She clasped his arm with an involuntary clutch and looked with eyes of warm sympathy and deep alarm into his face.

"To think of it!" she shuddered. "Such terrible dangers! But it was not my uncle. You accuse him wrongfully. It was that captain! He is your enemy!"

"This is the third attempt," Dick quietly rejoined. "And it is in your uncle's own house."

"This an attempt at murder!" she exclaimed, her eyes dilating with affright.

"Do not be frightened," he soothingly replied. "I do not know their game. But I fancy I can play a trump for every one of theirs."

He was interrupted by an alarming incident which at that moment occurred. The shutters of the single window of the room were violently slammed shut, leaving them in total darkness.

This was such an unlooked-for event that Dick, vigilant as he was, was utterly unprepared for it. He groped his way through the darkness to the window as quickly as possible, and sought with all his strength to force open the closed shutters, but in vain. They were in some way firmly fastened on the outside. Whatever the schemes of the villains, they were ripening fast.

"The fiends seize them, it is fast!" he cried. "What devilish trick are they up to now?"

Poor Clara, who was half beside herself with fright, ran hastily toward the sound of his voice, and threw her arms impulsively around him, crying out in piteous tones:

"Oh save me! save me! We shall be murdered! I know we shall be murdered!"

Dick strove to reassure her, but was in no haste to release himself from her encircling arms. He found that part of the situation to be a decidedly agreeable one. But she herself, with a sense of shame, quickly released him, though she continued to cling distractedly to his arm.

"Have more courage, I beg you, Miss Clara," he appealed. "We may need all our nerve now. Stay! there was a candle on the mantle. We will have some light, at all events."

In a moment he had struck a match, which sent its clear illumination through the darkened room. There was a candle, as he had said, and he soon had it in full blaze.

His eyes first fell on the face of his companion. He saw a countenance pale as death, the eyes fixed upon him with mute and piteous appeal.

"Have courage, dear Clara," he said, a strange sentiment of tenderness creeping into his heart, and displaying itself in his voice.

"Do be composed, and trust in me to save you." His arm clasped itself around her waist, while her form yielded itself trustingly to his embrace. "I will save you or die for you, as I would for—a sister."

"And I will trust in you as I would in—a brother," she haltingly rejoined. "For I feel drawn to you as if you were indeed my brother."

"Have you no brother?" he softly asked.

"Why, do you not know? I had but one brother, and he was gone before I was born."

"Did he die?" asked Dick.

"No, no! Would that he had! He was stolen! He was taken from us when a mere child! We have never seen nor heard of him since! Ah! I fear his loss had much to do with the death of my dear father and mother."

Dick made no reply, but a strange thought came into his mind, which caused him to clasp his arm closer around the yielding form by his side.

"What is the matter?" she whispered. "It seems to me that the air is growing close and choking. I can scarcely get my breath."

"It must be the close room," answered Dick. "There is no chance for fresh air to enter."

"No. It cannot be that. Look—look at the candle! How blue it is burning! It scarcely gives any light at all. And now—ah! it has gone out! We are in darkness again!"

It was as she said. The flame of the candle had rapidly grown less, and had suddenly been extinguished. The air was thick and choking. They could hardly breathe. Dick quivered with his first impulse of dread. The air which would not support a flame was not fit for the breathing of a human being. A thought of horrible import came to his mind.

"Good Heavens!" he cried, "they are poisoning us with charcoal gas! That is why they have sealed the room! They are poisoning us!"

"Air! Air!" she cried in feeble tones. "I shall die if I do not get air!"

She staggered from his protecting arm, reeled for a moment in the suffocating atmosphere, and then fell like a dead weight to the floor.

Dick's first impulse was to fly to her aid. But what could he do? There was but one hope. Fresh air must be had, or they could not live a minute more. The fumes of the burning charcoal seemed pouring more and more densely into the room.

The thought leaped into his mind. The choke gas was heavy. There was fresh air above it. He might make a hole through the plaster partition wall of the room.

As quick as the thought was the act. He dashed the square table from the center of the apartment against the side wall, leaped upon it and drew from his pocket with hasty fingers a long-bladed knife.

A quick lunge drove this keen blade through the plastered wall. In a second he had cut out a large square of the plaster, and laid bare the laths to which it was fastened.

A quick cut severed one of these, and his strong fingers soon broke away several of them. An opening was made to the lath and plastered wall on the opposite side of the partition.

As quick a movement of attack and this was also pierced. Wood and plaster went rattling to the floor. It was less than a minute since he had mounted the table, and already an opening of six inches square was made in the wall.

Nor was it any too soon. He was choking and gasping for breath. One long draught of the pure outer air, and then his head reeled, and he fell heavily from the table to the floor, a senseless form. His effort had, to all appearance, been made too late.

CHAPTER XI.

A FIGHT FOR LIFE.

WHILE the scene just related was taking place in the sealed room, other events were occurring in other apartments of that mansion. As Dick had conceived, the insurance agents had not succeeded in escaping. They had made their way along a passage to an adjoining room, but here they found themselves prisoners. The schemes of the murderers had been too well laid to leave open any loophole for escape.

In a room below that occupied by Dick and Clara sat four men, very strangely occupied. In the middle of the floor was a charcoal furnace, kindled, and blazing with a faint flame, but a white heat. One of these men, the hang-dog sailor whom we have already seen, knelt before the furnace, blowing into it with a bellows, his face as earnest as if he was engaged in some very laudable occupation.

Above the furnace was a broad-bottomed pipe, which gathered the deadly fumes and carried them upward through the ceiling of the room. Around it were three men, crouched forward, and with their eyes fixed on the lurid fuel with an expression like that of the witches in Macbeth.

These persons were the merchant, Richard Gordon, the mariner, Captain Sparks and the Westerner, Howard Brown. But now, they looked like three murderers, with their wrinkled brows, their staring eyes and the sinister lines of their faces, as they watched the flame with a deep fascination.

"It is burning down. Put on another stick," commanded the merchant, in a low, concentrated tone, that had in it something of the hiss of the snake.

"Can they stand it long?" asked Brown, with an involuntary shudder.

"Ten minutes would kill an ox," was the reply, in the same tone.

The minutes passed. Of them all the sailor at the bellows seemed the least concerned in their murderous work. His face was devoid of expression, beyond that of honest devotion to duty. One would have thought that he was engaged in some perfectly creditable undertaking.

"If you had done your work well twenty years ago," remarked the merchant, "you would not have had the trouble of finishing it

to-day. It was understood then that the boy was never to come back."

"And he wouldn't," answers Brown, "except for that milk-livered Dash—"

"Hush. No names."

"He was too blazin' soft-hearted, anyway."

"No matter. This day's work will end it. The boy's life seems charmed. He has escaped death by water and by fire. Let us see if he can escape it by gas. You shall see that I do not do my work by halves, like the rest of you."

"It comes more nat'ral to you than to us, maybe," growled Captain Sparks. "And you've got more to make by it."

"Don't fear that. Finish this last job, and you shall all be made rich. We can live honest citizens hereafter."

A laugh that was as discordant as the growl of a wolf came from the sailor who knelt over the fire.

"Aren't we honest folks now?" he muttered. "We're only blowin' up the fire to keep us warm. Leastways that's all I knows on't."

He ended with a choking sensation, as if he had swallowed some of the fumes from the furnace. The others, who were bending forward over it, found themselves affected the next moment in the same manner. They drew hastily back, but the effect continued. The room seemed to be filling with the deadly fumes.

"What does this mean?" cried the merchant, hastily opening the door to admit the fresh air.

"It means that the room above is choking full of the gas," affirmed the Westerner. "It's drivin' back now on us. You can bet a coyote that the job's done above."

Mr. Gordon shook his head.

"Give them ten minutes more," he said. "Best make sure as long as time's plenty." He threw up the window-sash to let in more air.

"How 'bout t'other two, in the next room?" asked Captain Sparks.

"One job at a time," was the cool reply. "We will attend to them next."

Yet all was not quite as safe as the villains imagined. We left their two intended victims insensible on the floor of the poisoned room, but they were not dead. Dick's alertness in opening an air passage through the wall, had combined with a strange chance to save them from the deadly peril.

The outflow of charcoal-fumes into the lower room had come from another cause than that supposed by the villains, a strange and providential chance.

It had already been told how Clara reeled and fell prostrate to the floor, overcome by the deadly gas, just before Dick made his attack on the wall. Her fall had done as much to save them from death as the opening he had made for ventilation.

For, by a happy chance, she had fallen against the side wall, at the very point where came in the death-dealing pipe from the furnace. The skirt of the thick woolen cloak she wore had forced itself into and completely closed up the entrance to the tube. Happily the outflow of suffocating gas was checked. No wonder they had felt its effects below. It had no exit above.

At the same time fresh air was slowly making its way in at the opening Dick had made, and mingling with the deadly gas. The gasping and choking for breath ceased. The air of the room was again becoming pure and healthy.

Dick, whose senses had not quite been lost, staggered to his feet, and supported himself against the table, while his head reeled and throbbed with a fierce pain. A moan came from the lips of the fallen girl that drew him hastily toward her. He felt for her senseless form on the floor. He touched her hands, her face; they were cold as death.

"Clara! Dear Clara!" he appealed. "The pure air is coming! You are saved!"

With a sudden thought he sprang again to the table, hastily increased the size of the opening, and used his hat as a fan to draw the outer air more rapidly in.

He was still thus employed, and the air of the room was momentarily becoming purer, when there came to his ears the sounds of steps and low voices from the passage outside the door.

With as quick an impulse as before Dick sprang noiselessly from the table, and stretched himself upon the floor with his face downward. It might be well to counterfeit death.

A faint click told of the cautious turning of the key. The door slowly opened and a face looked in—a face full of dread and of devilish hope.

"It is done," came in a fiendish whisper. "They are dead. Wait. Let the fresh air in first. We cannot breathe those fumes."

The door was thrown wide open, and they

withdrew a few steps. Several minutes were suffered to elapse before they ventured into the death-trap which they had made.

The eyes of Richard Gordon gazed with exultation upon the bodies of his two victims seemingly stretched in death.

"When I do my own work it is never half-done," he remarked. "At last they are out of my way."

"That in not so sure," exclaimed Howard Brown. "See what a hole he has made in this wall. He may not be dead."

"The hole in the wall will not save him." The murderous merchant stooped and took hold of Dick's arm, expecting to let it fall with a dead thud to the floor.

He was never more disappointed and astonished than by the result. In an instant he felt himself gripped as by the clutch of a lion. The supposed dead man twisted himself around, drew himself to his knees, and with a sudden hoist to the legs of the unsuspecting merchant flung him over his head. The astounded villain came with a heavy crash to the floor.

Like a flash the alert youth was on his feet, and confronting his three remaining foes.

"Howard Brown!" he exclaimed. "You here? Then take that! It is part of the old debt!"

As he spoke, Dick's fist shot fiercely out. It took the shrinking villain square between the eyes. Down he went as if he had been struck by a pile-driver, shaking the whole house in his fall.

"Four to one!" shouted the furious youth, as he made for his two remaining foes. "But one honest man is worth a dozen rogues. You have had your fling. It is my turn now."

The two sailors retreated through the open door of the room. They had had a sufficient foretaste of Dick's quality.

He eagerly followed them, striking to right and left, and warding off the blows which they dealt in return.

"Come on!" he hoarsely shouted. "I am ready for a score of such men now!"

A steady left-hander caught Mark Morford in the throat, and dropped him prostrate at the head of the stairs. But a single foe remained on foot, and Dick rushed furiously at Captain Sparks.

"Hound and devil!" he shouted. "You have tried three times to murder me! You shall see the metal of Dashing Dick of Dakota!"

A hoarse growl came from the captain's lips as he rushed in and grappled with the athletic youth. He evidently recognized that he was no match for Dick with his fists, and designed to try what virtue there was in hardened and trained muscles.

Dick, nothing loth, grappled with his antagonist. But he knew that his work must be done quickly. Those whom he had felled would soon be on their feet again, and they meant death to him. Even as he struggled with the strong-limbed captain he saw that his other three foes were afoot, and were gathering around as if for an opportunity to take part in the fray.

Yet the combatants were so active in their movements that there was no chance for an outsider to seize either of them. Back and forth in the passage, from side to side, around and around, they twisted and whirled, now one, now the other, having a momentary advantage. Now the captain's face glared into the eyes of his friends. Now Dick's, with set lips and flushed brows, for a moment appeared.

Dick had caught his antagonist by the waist. The latter had the upper hold, and was doing his best to get his iron gripe on the throat of his young foe.

The young man realized vividly that this could not go on. His strength was being drained from him in the fight, and three strong men stood waiting to attack him at its end. But, though he had not the muscular endurance of Captain Sparks, he much surpassed him in agility, and in knowledge of the art of wrestling.

A quick, vigorous stoop tore his shoulders loose from the sailor's gripe. At the same time his arms slid down his antagonist's body, and tightened like withes around his knees. One strong, surging lift, and Captain Sparks was raised bodily from the floor, his arms vainly beating the air above the young man's head.

Then came a vigorous heave, a powerful send, and over Dick's shoulders shot the dead weight of his foe, with a true Dakota fling.

It was a fatal fall for Captain Sparks. As it happened they had stood at the very head of the stairs, and down the stairway like a hurled stone went the unlucky captain, never bringing up until he struck the floor below. It proved

a deadly bringing up for him. He struck head first, and broke his neck in the fall. Captain Sparks would sail or sink no more vessels on the lake!

For a moment his remaining foes looked upon Dick with startled eyes, astounded by his feat of strength. Then, with a simultaneous movement they rushed upon him, Mark Morford drawing a wicked-looking knife from his belt.

"Blow me, if it ain't time to put a stop to this baby play!" he growled. "If he gets away it's all up with us."

He rushed savagely forward, brandishing his knife. It was a moment of desperate danger for Dick. He had been attacked from the two sides by his two other foes, and here in front came rushing this savage with uplifted knife.

Dick might have escaped by the stairs behind him, but he never thought of that. His blood was fully up, and fight, not flight, alone occupied his mind.

Two quick blows, to right and left, relieved him for the moment of two of his antagonists. But they opened him to the assault of the murderous sailor, who brandished the deadly blade above his head, as he cried:

"Leave me the Rocky Mountain cat! I'll slit his weasand for him!"

The knife quivered above Dick's defenseless breast. The glare of a murderous purpose was in the sailor's eyes. It seemed as if nothing could save the youth from the impending death.

But the blow never fell. A strong hand caught the sailor's uplifted arm. A powerful wrench, and the weapon fell harmlessly to the floor; a vigorous send, and the villain was hurled helplessly against the wall.

Behind him appeared the honest, weather-beaten face of Jack Brace. In the rear stood the two insurance agents, Mr. Flint and Mr. Dove.

"We're jist in the nick of time!" cried old Jack. "These dogs have had their day, and it's our turn now!"

With a left-handed swipe of his arm he took Mark, who was just recovering his level, on the jaw. It was a successful blow. The villain toppled over and went bumping down the stairs, to join his captain at the foot.

CHAPTER XII.

THE LAST TRUMP PLAYED.

THE sudden and very opportune appearance of Jack Brace and the two agents needs some explanation. The old sailor was shrewder than he was usually given credit for, and when he had left his three companions in the street on pretense of business elsewhere, it was with an object of which they did not dream.

"There's summat queer 'bout that young 'oman with the bit o' paper," he muttered. "Now-a-days ther's sich a mess o' devilry afoot that a chap's got to keep his mainsail close hauled, or under he goes. I'm afeared as this is a tack of Cap Sparks; and if it is, a pair of sound eyes on the outside is as good as two di'monds. Can't ring in old Jack with their tricks. I'm goin' to lay low and foller."

He had done so, keeping at a good distance until his three friends disappeared in the house to which they had been conducted. Jack lingered around this, not knowing just what to do. After a few minutes he saw the young woman who had acted as guide again leave the house, and pass rapidly down the street.

The old tar shook his head doubtfully. "There's too much o' that young 'oman," he muttered. "And somehow I don't like the cut of that caboose."

After a few minutes more of indecision he went up and tried the door, with the thought of entering. It was locked. The old fellow shook his grizzled head more dubiously than ever.

"There's snakes about," he growled. "Vipers and rattlers, or old Jack's a green 'un."

If the house could not be entered from the front it might be from the rear. Such was his next thought. With some difficulty he found his way around the group of low frame buildings to the rear of the tall mansion, that loomed upward like a giant in the midst of dwarfs.

There was a fence, over which he climbed with the agility of a cat. He now found himself in a narrow and contracted yard, bricked, and leading up to the rear of the house.

The lower windows were closed, but there was something else quickly caught old Jack's eyes. This was a ladder raised against the back wall, and leading to a window on the third floor. But the shutters of this window were closed and firmly barred on the outside.

He was still mentally debating what this meant, and cogitating whether or not to mount the ladder in search of adventures, when a crash of glass to the right arrested his attention.

The glass and woodwork of a window sash to the left of the closed window came rattling down to the brick pavement, and the head of a man was protruded through the opening.

Jack recognized him at a glance. It was Mr. Flint, the insurance agent.

"Hillo, aloft!" hailed the old tar. "What's loose, shipmate?"

The imprisoned agent gave a cry of joy on seeing who was below.

"Jack Brace!" he ejaculated. "We have been trapped here, Jack. We are prisoners. Can you get us out? Yonder ladder will do. Bring it to this window."

Jack already had the same idea, and was tugging at the ladder ere the agent had finished speaking.

It was heavy and clumsy for one man to handle, but the old fellow was tough and strong. He soon managed to shift its top so as to bring the topmost rung within reach of Mr. Flint's extended hand. While the latter held it Jack shifted the bottom.

"Hang to it now, Jack," cried Mr. Flint, "and we'll be with you in a jiffy."

He ran awkwardly but hurriedly down the ladder, and was quickly followed by Mr. Dove. Jack continued to keep his eyes expectantly on the window.

"We were nailed there," explained Mr. Flint. "The window sash was fastened. I had to smash it out with a chair."

"But where's the other? Where's Dashing Dick?" asked the sailor.

"I forgot him," cried Mr. Flint, in alarm. "He is in the next room. There where the shutter is closed. And there's a young lady prisoner there with him."

"Then ther' ain't a minute to waste," exclaimed Jack. "It's murderers we're dealin' with now; not babies. Help me over with the ladder."

Three pairs of hands soon succeeded in replacing the ladder in its former situation, and Jack ran up it like a cat, as though he were grasping the ratlines of a ship's shrouds.

The window was reached, the bar which fastened it quickly removed, the shutters flung open, the sash lifted. All this was the work of a minute, but the old sailor withdrew his head with a fierce growl, as there came out a gush of poisonous vapor that nearly choked him.

But sounds came to his ears from within that quickly restored his animation. There was the noise of blows, of heavy falls, of oaths, of a fierce struggle, of thuds that shook the house to its foundations.

"Arter me, gentlemen," cried Jack, to the others who were climbing the ladder behind him. "There's Old Nick to pay here, and no pitch hot."

Clutching the window-sill he leaped like a cat into the room. His quick eyes keenly surveyed it. There was nothing of importance there, except the form of a woman, who lay against the wall on one side.

The sound of the struggle continued, but it came from the passage outside. Jack ran hastily to the door leading into the passage, and just in time to witness a remarkable spectacle.

There was Dashing Dick, confronted by three foes and grappled with a fourth. But at the instant in which Jack reached the door the form of Captain Sparks was hurled like a dead weight over the head of the athletic youth, and went crashing down the stairs.

All this had passed like a flash, and at the same moment the three remaining foes rushed upon their young antagonist. Two quick blows from the shoulder, to right and left, sent two of these staggering back. The third with a bitter oath, and with uplifted knife, flew at the unguarded youth.

We have seen the result. Jack was on him like a cat, wrenched the blade from his hand, hurled him against the wall, and with a second blow sent him tumbling down the steep stairs.

"Who's next?" cried Jack, glaring fiercely around.

But there was no one next. The two main villains had caught a glimpse of these reinforcements and rushed for the stairs.

The insurance agents followed, but old Jack paused on catching a sign from Dick.

"Let them go!" cried the latter. "There is a lady here, dying or dead, whose life is worth that of a regiment of these hounds. Whether they escape or not I must look after her."

He rested for an instant against the wall, while his breath came in deep pantings. He now, for the first time, felt how severe had been his late exertions.

"Are you dismantled?" asked Jack, in alarm.

"Did they git in any shots 'twixt wind and water?"

"No. I am only out of breath. I am all right now."

He led the way hastily back to the room that had lately been his prison. Clara still lay where she had fallen, but her eyes were partly open, and a moaning sound came from her lips.

He caught her up from the floor with a passionate impulse.

"My God!" he cried; "you are not dead? You are not going to die? As I am a living man, if they have killed you, you shall be bitterly revenged!"

His hasty action had an unexpected effect. We have already told how the skirt of her thick woolen cloak had closed up the death-dealing pipe and drove back the hot mephitic vapors of the charcoal furnace. In doing so, it had become intensely heated and ready to burst into flame at the access of air. The quick movement as Dick snatched her from the floor completed this effect. The skirt of the cloak burst into a blaze.

In a moment the flames were shooting up toward her head. Her slowly returning senses seemed to catch this new danger at once, and with an impulse of affright she sought to break from the hands that held her.

A short and perilous struggle ensued, Dick seeking to tear off the burning garment and to prevent the mad effort at flight of the scared and only half-conscious girl. Old Jack had also rushed to the rescue and was rolling up the skirt of the flaming cloak in an effort to smother out the climbing blaze.

Fortunately the garment was of thick woven wool. It burned but slowly, and so far her dress had escaped the flames. After a minute's awkward efforts the young man succeeded in opening the intricate fastening and in loosening the dangerous garment. It yielded to the old sailor's jerking hands, and in a minute more he had flung it to the floor and was trampling out the perilous flame.

"Thank the Lord, that's over!" cried Dick, devoutly.

She broke from his arms and fell into a chair, covering her face with her hands as she burst into a flood of tears. The nerves of the poor girl were completely unstrung by the excitement of the last few minutes, and it was impossible for her to avoid this display of womanly weakness.

Dick looked on helplessly, though deeply concerned. He would have given his head to have saved her from this passion of grief. But what could he do?

"Let her alone," said old Jack, briefly. "It'll do the young 'oman good. Ye don't know their natur's like I do. That fire were better nor a dose of smel-in' salts to fetch back her senses."

At this moment the two insurance agents reappeared. They were none too well provided with courage, and had given up the pursuit immediately upon perceiving that they were not seconded by their friends. But they were not quite ready to acknowledge this, and sought to explain their return.

"They locked themselves into a down-stairs room," explained Mr. Dove. "We tried to burst open the door but it was too strong. So we came back to look after you."

All of which was true, except that their efforts to break open the door had not been very great. They were a little fearful of what might be on the other side.

Had they known what was taking place below they might have been more energetic. The two sailors still lay at the foot of the stairs where they had fallen. Captain Sparks was dead—killed by his fall. Mark Morford was insensible. Heedless of them the two remaining villains flew to the room containing the charcoal furnace and locked themselves within.

"Which way now?" asked Brown.

"Hold a minute. I may catch them yet. He is a fool who holds only one trump card in his hand."

As he spoke he opened a deep closet, which filled the space under the stairs which they had just descended. It was crowded with various inflammable materials, rags, clothing, papers, trash of various kinds, all ready to kindle at a touch. Snatching up the charcoal-furnace, which still smoldered, the fiendish merchant hurled it into the closet, scattering its embers throughout the crowded contents. In an instant they had burst into a bright flame which curled up toward the stairs which formed the roof of the inclosure.

"If they delay long up there they will find their escape cut off," remarked Mr. Gordon, with a laugh of fiendish malignity.

"But how about our two friends outside?" asked Brown, who was not quite so lost to common humanity.

"Let them look to themselves. We have got our own safety to care for. There is that ladder in the yard. It must be thrown down. The good soldier snatches victory from defeat."

Utterly unaware of these events the freed prisoners were gathered in the room above, waiting until the nervously excited woman should recover her composure. The door had been thoughtlessly closed by Mr. Dove, on entering the room, so that they were quite unaware of the events proceeding without.

Five minutes passed. Dick was so wrapped up in the recovery of Clara as to forget all else; but old Jack was not quite at his ease.

"We're fools to hang on here with them devils below," he declared. "Maybe their bag of tricks isn't empty yet. Jist see if the young 'oman can't walk."

His words were emphasized by a loud crash, which came from the direction of the yard. Mr. Flint, who stood nearest the open window, hastened to look out, and cried, in a tone of alarm:

"The ladder has been thrown down! Our escape in that direction is cut off!"

"To the stairs, then!" cried Jack.

He flung open the door, but his eyes dilated strangely on his first glance out. For a loud crackling sound, a glare of lurid light, a smell of smoke, came through the open door.

"By all that's good, the stairs are in a red blaze!" he cried. "It's a sheet of fire! A salamander couldn't git down them without a singin'!"

"And the ladder's gone!" repeated Mr. Flint.

They looked at one another with eyes dilated with alarm. They were now trapped indeed. The house ablaze below them, every avenue of flight cut off. What was to be done?

Dick twined his arm around the waist of the poor shuddering girl.

"Do not fear," he whispered. "I have pulled through worse scrapes than this."

CHAPTER XIII.

OUT OF THE FLAMES.

YET it did not appear how escape was to be made. Flight by means of the window had been cut off by the fall of the ladder. One door of the room was firmly locked. The other opened upon a passage leading to the stairs, which were now one broad sheet of flame. The doors of some other rooms opened upon the passage, but no other stairway appeared, and no means of escape.

The two insurance agents, in wild affright, rushed from room to room, yelling "Fire! Fire!" from the

windows. But whether everybody in that street had emigrated, or were asleep, did not appear, but these cries of alarm seemed to be unheard.

"Good heavens! We will be burned alive! Nobody can be made to hear!" they cried, in an agony of fear.

Dick stood supporting the helpless girl. Not a word came from his lips as yet, though it was evident he was engaged in deep thought. Old Jack stood near by, with his eyes fixed on Dick's face. He evidently put great confidence in the young fellow's resources.

"Well, what's afloat, shipmate?" asked the old man, in a querulous tone. "Blast my peepers if we've got any minutes to waste in thinkin'. And I've got clean to the bottom of my brain-pan, and ain't found nothin' there wuth a woodchuck."

"I have it!" cried Dick, suddenly. "We must take the window for it."

"I'd like ter know how," growled the old tar. "Do ye s'pose an old salt didn't think o' that? But there isn't a rope, nor as much as a piece of thread about. And we can't lower ourselves down with our pocket handkerchers."

Dick made no answer. He tenderly replaced Clara in a chair.

"Be composed," he said, in a low tone. "Trust to me. I will save you yet."

It was high time, indeed, for some decided action to be taken, for the flames were shooting to the ceiling, and threatened to soon wrap the whole house in their devouring flood. The lurid glow and the fierce heat were already rendering that room insupportable. Dick looked around him for an instant.

"Get a spike, the leg of a bedstead, anything that will hold!" he exclaimed. "We've got to work lively."

He opened his knife as he spoke, while the others watched his movements with hope and curiosity. They were not long in seeing his intention. The floor of the room in which they stood was covered with a strong ingrain carpet, and in a minute Dick was running his keen blade along this, cutting it lengthwise into wide strips. Jack, catching the idea, drew his long sheath-knife and hastily assisted.

The carpet, thus cut into strips, was next severed from its connection with the floor, and they found themselves in possession of a half-dozen strong bands, each ten feet long.

"Now, gentlemen, lively's the word," said Dick. "We must twist and knot our rope. Everybody here isn't used to sliding down smooth lines, like Jack Brace. Get us something for a hold, Mr. Flint. Knock a bedstead to pieces. And be quick about it."

He and the old sailor rapidly twisted and knotted the strips of carpet, and Jack tied the separate pieces together, with all the skill in knot-making of a practiced mariner.

By this time Clara had somewhat recovered from her agitation, and was watching the hasty operations of her friends with hope and interest.

"Talk about Dakota wit!" cried Dick joyfully. "There's forty feet of a solid rope, and not five minutes in the making. And by Heaven we've all got to get out of here in another five minutes, or it will be too late! The fire is spreading like mad."

It had already caught the floor of the passage when Mr. Flint hurried back through the scorching heat, grasping the thick and long post of a bedstead.

"Tie the rope to it and set it across the window," directed Dick. "Now, Miss Clara, it is your turn to go down first."

"But how am I to do so?" she asked, looking doubtfully at the preparations.

"You must be lowered down," answered Dick. "Do not be afraid. There will be no danger."

While speaking he was engaged in firmly knotting the thick rope around her slender waist, calling on old Jack to make the final knot.

She quietly submitted, though her face grew pale as she realized the object he had in view.

"You must not be alarmed," he repeated. "Remember the fire is behind us."

"I am not afraid," she rejoined. "Haste, for Heaven's sake! There is not a second to lose!"

"Clasp the rope with both hands, and hold firmly to it," directed Dick. "We will lower you carefully."

Her cheek blanched still more as she was lifted out of the window, and dangled in the free air. But there was a light in her eyes, and an enforced smile upon her lips.

"Courage," she said. "I am not afraid. But do hasten! The flames are spreading with fearful rapidity."

They did not need to be told the necessity of haste. The room was becoming insupportably hot. Rapidly but carefully the rope was paid out, all hands assisting. There was nothing to keep her from grazing against the side of the house in her descent, but in less than a minute it was accomplished, and she stood safely on the ground below.

"After her, Jack!" cried Dick. "You can run down that rope like a squirrel, and tighten it for the rest of us."

The remainder of the rope was paid out, until the supporting beam firmly crossed the window from side to side. Without a word the old sailor sprang through the opening, grasped the rope, and ran down it hand over hand as if he had been descending a ship's stay-line.

"Now, Mr. Flint!"

At this moment a cry of alarm came from Clara's lips.

"What is it?" cried Dick, anxiously. "Has anything happened to the rope?"

"No. But there is a dead man here. Dead and bleeding."

"The deuce! But there will be dead men here if we don't hurry. Quick, Mr. Flint."

As the agent was slowly and cautiously descending the flames burst redly through the floor of the room, not six feet from where they stood. Mr. Dove, frightened out of his wits, sprang for the rope. But Dick clutched him firmly by the shoulder.

"Hold your level!" he sternly exclaimed. "We can't trust two men at once on that cord. Hold, I say! or by Jupiter, I'll do you a harm. Hey, below there, is all clear?"

"Ay, ay!" came in old Jack's vigorous tones.

"Then away with you, friend Dove. I will stand by the ship to the last."

Mr. Dove did not wait for a second bidding. He scrambled out of the window so hastily indeed, that he had like to have tumbled headlong, but that Dick caught his collar.

"Clutch the rope!" he cried. "Now down with you!"

In fact there was not a second to spare. The flames which a minute before had made a breach through the floor, were now shooting up half-way to the ceiling, and mingling in red tongues with those that poured through the open door. The heat was growing terrible, choking clouds of smoke rolled toward the resolute youth, long shoots of flame darted toward him, like fiery serpents eager to enwrap him in their deadly folds. Mr. Dove was yet not half-way down the knotted rope, but Dick could stand it no longer. He sprang hastily through the window, and let himself hang by the sill with his two hands. It was not safe to trust a double weight to the doubtful rope, and he was determined not to do so till the last second.

A cry of alarm came from below as Clara perceived his dangerous position, and a quick flash of flame through the window above his head.

"Hurry with you, you awkward fool!" cried old Jack sternly. "Take the rope, Dick. It'll bear you."

"No, no. Is he near down?"

"Yes. Let go, you blasted greenhorn, and drop the rest! Now, Dick. Hand over hand, like a sailor."

Dick saw the rope loosen, as it was released below. Instantly he caught it, and began to descend, with an agility not surpassed by that of old Jack himself.

And it was high time, for every instant the flames shone more luridly through the window, and red tongues shot into the free air.

"Hurry!" yelled Mr. Flint. "The rope is in a blaze above!"

There was no need for the warning. Dick was coming down with the rapidity of a squirrel. Not three seconds had elapsed since he caught it above, and he was already within ten feet of the ground. But the flames were as rapid in their work. At this instant there came a loosening of the strands above, a crack, and down came the blazing end of the rope, letting Dick fall the remaining distance.

"Thank the stars the ground wasn't far off," he said, as he lit like a cat on his feet, and dashed off the blazing fibers of carpet which had lodged upon his broad-brimmed hat. "But it was nip and tuck; and tuck didn't win by more than an inch."

He looked up, with his old, careless courage, at the window, through which the flames were now more freely shooting.

"You are safe? You are not hurt?" anxiously cried Clara, seizing him impulsively by the arm, and gazing with deep wistfulness into his face.

"Safe and sound as a California dollar," he answered. "And thank the stars no harm has come to you. I could never have forgiven myself if you had been hurt."

"But you had nothing to do with getting me into the danger," she protested, with downcast eyes and flushing cheeks.

"No matter for that, I feel—I think—What did you say about there being a dead man here?" he demanded, suddenly changing the conversation from the awkward phase to which it was verging.

"He lies yonder," she answered, with equal display of eagerness to change the subject.

Dick hastily turned toward the point over which the other men were already eagerly bending. There lay, indeed, a lifeless form, in a pool of blood, a fragment of the heavy ladder crushing the corpse.

"It is Howard Brown!" cried Dick. "It is one of the murderous wretches! It was he flung down the ladder, and it has fallen upon and crushed him!"

"Paid in his own coin," exclaimed Mr. Flint.

"He sought our death and has met his own."

"Two others of them have met the same fate," broke in Mr. Dove. "We found the two sailors insensible at the foot of the stairs. They were abandoned by their confederates. They must have perished in the flames."

"A just retribution," cried Dick. "But the chief devil of them all has escaped. Gordon has got off scot free."

"Don't build too high on that notion," answered old Jack. "I've an idea he got a pinch. See here."

He pointed to another spot where drops of blood dabbled the brown bricks.

"It's been a sharp pinch, too. He won't run away."

During the events here related the alarm of fire had been spreading, and now the first fire-engine came dashing up, ready to battle with the fiercely burning flames.

The rescued friends quietly withdrew through the rear gateway, Dick being specially anxious to relieve Clara from the scrutiny of the gathering throng.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE READING OF THE LETTER.

SEVERAL days have passed since the date of the events recorded in our last chapter. We must ask the reader to accompany us to another scene, the home of Clara Gordon, and to the beautifully-furnished boudoir of this charming young lady.

She is there now, in company with a young gentleman whom we will not at first sight recognize.

This well-dressed youth, with his fashionably cut suit of black cloth, and the silk hat which he holds gracefully in his hand, certainly is unlike any of the characters we have yet met.

Yet a glance at his face tells another story. For there are the black eyes and hair, the handsome features, and the frank and careless expression of Dick Dashaway himself. It is our old friend in a new garb, the caterpillar transformed into a butterfly.

A smile of welcome is on her lips as he holds her extended hand in his. And there is in her face evidence of a woman's quick appreciation. She plainly approves of the change.

"Would you have known me?" he asks, pleased with her approving look.

"Oh yes! of course I would. But you do not know how you are improved."

"I don't feel so," he answered, with an uneasy twist. "I feel just as if I had been put into the stocks."

"You look so, at any rate. I hope you will never wear that wild western suit again."

"Don't ask for any rash promises," laughed Dick. "I am not sure of myself. Do you know that this is my freedom suit? I am twenty-one years old to-day."

"Indeed!" she answered, with interest.

"Yes. And that is why I am here. And because—"

"Because what?"

"Because I fancy that it may prove something of great importance to both of us. We have been strangers, Clara, and yet I think there is a near connection between us which gives me a right to call you by that name, and to love you as I have done since I first set eyes on you."

"What can there be?" she asked, in an altered tone.

"Wait till I tell you the brief story of my life."

He seated himself on the sofa beside her, and bent his eyes upon her glowing orbs.

"I'm a Dakota boy, as I have told you," he began. "I was brought up in a wild district near the mountains, and have spent much of my life in herding and hunting, and have not been quite ignorant of Indian fighting. I was the son, as I long supposed, of a Richard Dashaway; though another man, named Howard Brown, always exercised a certain authority over me. Of these two men Dashaway treated me well, but the other was much of a tyrant, until I grew old enough to rebel against his authority. And so my life went on until about two months ago, when my supposed father was taken suddenly very sick, and died after a few days. Before doing so, however, he called me to his bedside and told me that which very much surprised me. He was not my father, he said. He had done me a wrong for which he could never forgive himself, but wished to make reparation on his death-bed. I was to go to Chicago after his death, and on my twenty-first birthday was to open a paper which he gave me. From this I would learn the rest of my story."

"How strange a romance!" cried Clara. "And this is the day in which you are to open that mysterious paper?"

"Yes. But wait a minute more. I announced my intention of going to Chicago, but without giving my reasons. I was bitterly opposed in this by Howard Brown; but I had got beyond his reach; he could not control me any longer. Finding that I was determined upon it, he gave me a letter of introduction to a merchant of Chicago, who he said would give me employment. That merchant was Richard Gordon."

Clara drew a long breath. She had lost all faith in the integrity of her uncle since the late events.

"He gave me employment," continued Dick, bitterly. "Strange employment. He has made three successive efforts to murder me, and one to murder you. What does this mean? How are we in his way?"

"I do not know," she answered, though a new light was breaking into her eyes, and a thought stirring in her soul that made her whole frame quiver with hope and joy.

"There is a mystery hanging over my life," he continued. "This paper may unfold it."

He drew from his pocket the sealed letter we have already seen him examining on the deck of the Rover.

"For Richard Dashaway.—To be opened only on his twenty-first birthday."

Clara's eyes were fixed with warm avidity on the letter as Dick slowly broke the seal, with a movement as if he shrunk from any hasty revelation of the secret.

It contained a closely-written sheet, which he unfolded, and began to silently read.

"May I read it too?" asked Clara, unable to bear the suspense.

"Yes." Dick moved close to her and held the letter so that they could read it together.

We shall not repeat the contents of the long document. It went into details that would be of little interest to the reader. It will suffice to say that the eyes of both readers flashed and dilated as they caught the secrets of that rudely-written sheet. Their frames trembled. A warm color came into their cheeks.

Suddenly, as if she could contain herself no longer,

the impulsive girl dropped her side of the letter, flung her arms in a close embrace about Dick's neck, and pressed her lips to his in a kiss of warm affection.

"My brother! My long-lost brother! My dear, dear brother!" she exclaimed, her eyes filled with tears of joy.

"Sister! Dear sister!" repeated Dick, returning her affectionate kiss.

"Who would have thought it? Yet I felt drawn to you when first we met."

"And I to you. It seemed to me as if there was some link drawing us together."

"I fancied that I saw my own face in yours."

"Let us finish the paper," said Dick, drawing her to his side in a close embrace.

"Brother!" she murmured, as if she loved to dwell on the sound, as she nestled beside him.

We will briefly repeat the story of the document which they read at length. It was signed by Richard Dashaway, and recounted how he and two other persons, Howard Brown and Timothy Sparks, had been hired by Richard Gordon to abduct the infant son of his brother, Henry Gordon. The abduction had been successfully performed, and Dick was the stolen child. He had been brought up as his son by the writer of the paper, who had been all this time under the pay of Richard Gordon. He had long been remorseful for his act, and had striven to partly atone for it by treating the boy kindly. It had for years been his intention to reveal to him his true parentage upon his coming of age. But sickness had threatened the hindrance of this purpose, and the letter was written to prevent its being defeated.

"The others are dead," remarked Clara, with a serious countenance. "Only our uncle lives, and he was so badly hurt by the falling ladder that he cannot live many days. All the wealth that he has is ours, our inheritance, of which he sought to rob us. How strangely Providence defeats the aims of the wicked! But will that letter suffice to prove your identity? Will not further evidence be required?"

"I am not sure," answered Dick. "I will submit it to a lawyer. Perhaps Richard Gordon maybe induced to acknowledge his crimes, now that he is on his death-bed."

"And to think that he was harboring murderous schemes against me, through all his pretended kindness!" exclaimed Clara, with a shudder.

"His villainy was deep dyed," responded Dick. "But right and justice have prevailed."

The fall of the ladder, by which Richard Gordon had sought to take away the last avenue of escape from his intended victims, had indeed proved fatal to himself. By an awkward and unexpected twist it had fallen in an unlooked-for direction, and struck the two villains to the ground, crushing the life out of one of them, and seriously injuring the other. Although the wounded villain had succeeded in escaping from the scene of his crime, his hurt proved so serious that the doctor soon pronounced recovery impossible. We need not tell in what agony he writhed in learning that his attempted murder had only brought death upon himself and his confederates, that his reputation was blasted, that his victims had escaped his wiles, and that the rightful heirs would inherit the patrimony of which he had sought to rob them.

He at first refused to acknowledge the crime of abduction, or that Dick was the stolen son of his brother. But fortunately the letter which Dick had brought him from Howard Brown was found among his papers, and this made admissions which, in connection with Dashaway's letter, were enough to confirm the youth's claim to the inheritance. Confronted with this proof the villain made a final confession, almost his last act before death came to put an end to his criminal record.

He had husbanded the property left him well, and the brother and sister found themselves in possession of an ample inheritance. But of still more satisfaction to them than this property was Dick's delight in the discovery of such a beautiful and lovable sister, and Clara's joy in the finding of her long-lost brother in this handsome and noble youth to whom she had been involuntarily drawn.

As for the only other of our characters of any importance to us, old Jack Brace, he still sails the lake. Dick has offered to make life easy for him, and to plant him in a home of his own, with plenty of money, and a quiet time for his old age.

"I might take it up some day," declares the old man, "but not till I lose my sea legs. I can't live in peace 'cept I face a nor'wester now and then, and when I'm ready to take a double reef in my top-sails I'll call on you to lay me up in or'nary like a water-logged hulk."

As for Dashing Dick, we have in these pages related only the early adventures of his life as a man. His after life was an eventful one, and we may some day return to the record of his striking history.

THE END.

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